WORDSWORTH

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BY

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NINTH IMPRESSION

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INTRODUCTION

"If an author, by any single composition, has impressed us with respect for his talents, it is useful to consider this as affording a presumption that on other occasions where we have been displeased he, nevertheless, may not have written ill or absurdly; and further, to give him so much credit for this one composition as may induce us to review what has displeased us, with more care than we should otherwise have bestowed on it." This modest plea, addressed by Wordsworth to his contemporaries, was by them utterly rejected. It is the purpose of these pages to consider it anew; to approach the poetry of Wordsworth with a favourable predisposition; to attempt to read it as he would have wished it to be read, and to find in it what he attempted to express.

Literary criticism is a thing of many kinds and many shapes; but the largest part of it perhaps is judicial. To distinguish the good from the bad, whether by a fine taste or by the aid of fixed prin-

ciples, to praise and to blame, to approve and to condemn,—these are recognised activities of the critic. And for Wordsworth, it may be said, all this has long since been done. His cause is judged. His position is secure. He has taken his rank high among the greatest. The finest part of his work has been separated from the inferior bulk, so that new readers of his poetry may make straight for the noblest numbers, without wasting time in reading what the poet, less happy than they, wasted time in writing. Is there anything worth doing, it may be asked, that yet remains to be done?

No doubt, for the rougher purposes of justice, the cause is judged. But there will always remain a certain curious minority of the human race whose desire is not so much to judge a poet as to understand him. Like psychologists in a law-court, they take little interest in the verdict, which sound sense may easily supply; much in the process, for the light it throws at odd angles upon human nature. Or, like antiquaries, they attempt to reconstruct a vanished order from fragments that others are content to use as ornaments. The critic who believes, with Wordsworth, that poets are "men speaking to men," will find something precious in the least of their remains. One problem is here which he cannot neglect. Wordsworth, besides his poetry, has left a full

body of criticism on his own work. He was a critic almost as soon as he was a poet, and his theory of poetry is inextricably entangled with his practice of it. We know that he professed a method peculiar to himself, and that his judgments passed on his own writings are at many points in violent conflict with the judgments of his contemporaries and of later critics. Of Tennyson he said, "He is not much in sympathy with what I should myself most value in my attempts, viz. the spirituality with which I have endeavoured to invest the material universe, and the moral relations under which I have wished to exhibit its most ordinary appearances." When advised to add a stanza to the *Idiot Boy*—that great rock of offence in the canon of his works—he excused himself because "the narration of the poem is so rapid and impassioned that I could not find a place in which to insert the stanza without checking the progress of it, and so leaving a deadness upon the feeling." And to many utterances like this must be added the convincing testimony that Wordsworth was habitually unconscious of inequalities in his work, and took a keen delight in crooning over to himself his least admired compositions—

Like a river murmuring
And talking to itself when all things else
Were still.

Finally, we know that this poet, who held himself to be not as other poets are, who obstinately followed a way of his own, and, so far from guarding his secret, explained it, at great length and with much iteration, to the world at large, does actually at times awaken in the breasts of the most judicial of his readers a new sensation, a passing suspicion, at least, of untried possibilities in the scope and power of the poetic art. What he constantly professes he does sometimes achieve. Are not his professions and his method worthy of the closest examination even where he seems to have failed?

Impatient critics, hungry for an end of the cause, have suggested a solution of the problem. They feel a certain difficulty in explaining the amazing inequality of Wordsworth's poetry. If they were quite consistent they would not attempt to explain it, but would frankly assert that it is no part of the business of a selective and judicial criticism to show how bad poems come to be written. Yet in case the question should be pressed they are ready with an answer. There were two Wordsworths. They were born on the same day, lived the same life, and wrote with the same pen. Some of the poems belong wholly to the one, some wholly to the other. More usually the partners collaborated, taking turns with the pen until the poem was complete. And the

difference between them was simply this, that the less loquacious of the two was inspired, and there is an end of the matter. So the selective and judicial method of criticism receives the stamp of divinity. The poet is no longer a man speaking to men, but a reed through which a god fitfully blows.

Any effort to understand Wordsworth, to sympathise with his aims and achievements, to look the way that he is pointing, and to accompany him on his journey, must take account of the man as a single-minded and single-hearted person, expressing himself in all his works. A criticism of a poet that omits all reference to his failures is as futile a thing as a biography of a great soldier that passes in silence over his defeats. Indeed it is from the defeats that most may commonly be learned, for there the same genius and boldness that lead to victory are seen over-reaching themselves, planning too ambitiously, trusting too superbly, until at the crisis and height they are broken by their own excess. Of Wordsworth in particular it is hardly true to say that his strength and his weakness are closely knit up together; rather they are the same; his strength at its best is weakness made perfect, his weakness is the wasteful ebullition of his strength. It may be just and necessary to pronounce some of his poems childish, and others dull or silly; it cannot

be right to neglect them on that account, if we remember that the teachers whom he most reverenced, and from whom he learned the best part of his lore, were children, rustics, men of simple habits and slow wits. For the right understanding of his poems, he insisted, a reader must put off the pride that dwells by preference upon "those points wherein men differ from each other, to the exclusion of those in which all men are alike or the same." Yet, more than the poems of others, his poems have been made the exercising ground for gymnastic displays of vanity and cleverness.

Among profitless critics of Wordsworth, Francis Jeffrey deserves his established pre-eminence. It is not that he was either foolish or stupid. He was a shrewd lawyer, a forcible writer, a man of wide taste and sound judgment, so that he is a more than respectable type and embodiment of the bad critic that lies hidden in the breasts of all men. There is nothing wrong with his criticism except the point of view. Like all bad critics, he loved to consider his seat as a tribunal, and himself as a judge. His business, as he understood it, was to know the law and to administer it without fear or favour. To Wordsworth's plea that his work was tentative, novel, exploratory of untried recesses of the human mind, he turned a deaf ear. Every sensible man, he says in effect, knows quite well what a poet is about when he attempts a poem on

a particular subject. "A village schoolmaster, for instance, is a pretty common poetical character. Goldsmith has drawn him inimitably; so has Shenstone, with the slight change of sex; and Mr. Crabbe, in two passages, has followed their footsteps. . . . But by what traits is this worthy old gentleman delineated by the new poet? No pedantry—no innocent vanity of learning—no mixture of indulgence with the pride of power, and of poverty with the consciousness of rare acquirements. Every feature which belongs to the situation, or marks the character in common apprehension, is scornfully discarded by Mr. Wordsworth." The only question that remains to consider is whether the accused, in these his "wide and wilful aberrations" from "that eternal and universal standard of truth and nature, which every one is knowing enough to recognise," was acting in good faith, and really attempting to write a poem. He receives the benefit of the doubt, and, in mitigation of the sentence, the plea of temporary insanity, and that alone, is favourably entertained. From first to last there is no recognition of poetry as thought, as fulfilling in some sense the definition that Davenant gave to wit—"a new and remoter way of thinking."

Jeffrey must very early have given up the attempt to enter into those peculiarities in the mind of the author which cannot, as he admitted

be comprehended without much effort and explanation. A little, hard, sharp, legal mind will not readily forego the choice of weapons, or learn to enter into a new mood. And when once he had formed his judgment on Wordsworth's poetry Jeffrey did not despise the most vulgar and captious devices of the pleader or the reviewer to make the enemy ridiculous. One of the easiest and most popular of these is the method of comic summary, so much used by the average latter-day reviewer of novels. The *Excursion* does not depend for any part of its beauty or power on the story it tells. Let it therefore be implied that in this unessential feature the whole meaning of the work lies; that for this, and this alone, the poet challenges our attention and admiration. Here is all the account that Jeffrey gives of the Sixth Book of the *Excursion*:—

"The Sixth contains a choice obituary, or characteristic account, of several of the persons who lie buried before this group of moralisers;—an unsuccessful lover, who had found consolation in natural history—a miner, who worked on for twenty years in despite of universal ridicule, and at last found the vein he had expected—two political enemies, reconciled in old age to each other—an old female miser—a seduced damsel—and two widowers, one who had devoted himself to the education of his daughters, and one who

had preferred marrying a prudent middle-aged woman to take care of them."

His criticism of the *White Doe of Rylstone*, to which he devoted an article in October 1815, is rich in lessons for readers and critics of poetry. There are excuses to be made for Jeffrey; he was early in the field; to him Wordsworth was merely the most pretentious member of a new and paradoxical school of poetry; and, having read some previous poems by the same writer, he did not read, this time, with a mind susceptible to any favourable impression. His choicest sarcasm is to the effect that he does not understand what the poet means, which is true enough. And here, again, there are excuses to be made. The *White Doe* is not, in any obvious sense, a well-written poem. It would furnish some instances of obscure writing, some incidental weaknesses, and but few models of narration, to a handbook of rhetoric. The music of it is, for the most part, a music of thought; and the reader who refuses to think will find in it only a rambling and tedious story, where the commonest dramatic opportunities are missed. Yet to any one who has felt, even remotely, the strange elevation of thought and the lonely strength of emotion that uphold the poet throughout his dealings with this human agony, the comments of Jeffrey come like the noises of a street brawl breaking in

upon the performance of a grave and moving symphony.

So far as Wordsworth is concerned, nothing like this can happen again. The least sympathetic of readers, the flattest and vainest of critics, approaches a writer of acknowledged eminence in a spirit of caution; he modifies and temporises, and keeps open a line of retreat after his cleverest onslaughts. But a criticism that is valid only for settled causes is a worthless and vulgar criticism; it has nothing to say to a poet until he is accepted by the cultured mob. And Jeffrey's standard, "that eternal and universal standard of truth and nature which every one is knowing enough to recognise," has only to be adopted to ensure for the next new poet, as great and as novel in method as Wordsworth, the same reception, and for the first generation of his readers the same loss.

Is there any remedy or safeguard? The monkey and the parrot die hard in man; can they be taught to feel or to simulate modesty? It is they who foster the widespread belief that criticism is a kind of shorthand system, whereby right judgments, based on admitted principles, can be attained at the cost of infinitely less labour than was involved in the production of the work to be judged. Given that the principles are sound and sufficient, then, they argue, if there be no error of detail in the application, the result must be

valid. They overlook, however, one important element in the case. Poetry is original, or it is nothing. The admitted principles can never be sufficient to cover all the new cases that arise; if they were, there would be no reason why men of fair intellectual abilities should employ themselves in turning out goods to prescribed patterns. All poetry begins from the beginning; it creates its own world, and presents the eternally novel matter of experience in words that charm the ear of the simplest listener. Criticism must do the same; it must follow the poet, if he gives any token of being worth the following, step by step, recreating his experiences, hanging on his words, disciplining itself to the measure of his paces, believing in him and living with him, until, looking back on the way that it has been led, it shall be able to say whether the adventure is good and the goal worthy. There is no short cut to the end desired. Standards, eternal principles, formulas, summaries, and shibboleths, if they be substituted for the living experience, are obstacles and pitfalls. The poet, so far as he is a poet, accepts nothing on authority. The truths that he discovers have been discovered by many before him, but what makes them worth the communicating is that now he has discovered them again, reaching them, it may be, by a new track, but in any case by his own efforts, so that they come to him as the crown of his own

labours, and the fruit of his own sorrows and struggles and joys. And if the critic is to be a fit mediator between him and the home-staying public, he, too, must be an explorer, ready to follow where the other leads.

But what of the great critics, it may be asked, and is Aristotle not a pole-star for untried seas? We are deceived by industrial and scientific analogies, and expect too much from the men of old time. We cannot begin to read poetry where our fathers left off; we must begin where they began. The critic who, being himself a little man, attempts to raise himself on Aristotle is still a dwarf, and a maleficent dwarf. It is probable—it cannot be called certain—that Aristotle enjoyed the representation of Greek dramas. At least he enjoyed thinking about them; and his thoughts turned to the general conditions of poetic pleasure, and led him to frame some tentative laws explanatory of his own experiences. He could not foresee that he was arming every literary dunce in Europe, for many centuries, with weapons of outrage and offence. Like other great critics, he was an artist in science. An explanation was what he sought, an explanation which naturally assumed the existence of the thing to be explained. Pleasure in the Greek drama is now a rarer thing than once it was, but his explanation of it may still be used to decry other pleasures no less spontaneous and legitimate.

Aristotle is of use to the critic only as one poet—a great poet—is of use to another. It is good to see a master at work. But the material in which the literary critic works is still poetry itself. That a poet should be made from other poets without opening his eyes on life and the world is inconceivable. He will not even follow their methods too exactly, lest he should falsify his own gift of vision. And the material in which criticism works is as abundant and diverse and incomprehensible as life itself; it is life reflected in the mind of man.

When King Asa removed his mother from being queen because she had made an idol in a grove, and when he destroyed his mother's idol and burnt it by the brook Kidron, the high places, it is further recorded, were not removed. The critic, in every age, spends his zeal in vain in destroying his mother's idols, while the high places are not removed. And they are maintained not so much by the self-importance of the few who desire to speak from them as by the laziness of the many, who are easily content with an arrangement that provides them with opinions, and saves them from the unwelcome necessity of thinking. It is not uncommon to meet with persons, simple in speech and not widely read, who are born critics; they have the instinct for the essential, and the sympathy that enables them at once to set them-

selves at the author's point of view; but most of them are careful to disclaim all authority; they have read but little, they say, and their tastes and opinions are uncultivated, and probably wrong. It is perhaps a distorted form of the same diffidence which makes the critics themselves seek shelter from the ordeal of being left alone with a poem. They call in a bodyguard of stalwart authorities to protect them from that direct, intimate, and trustful converse which the poet seeks.

These remarks on the failings of criticism are germane to the subject, for Wordsworth felt these things. He desired to appeal from the public, whose brains are bemused with a little learning, to the people, whose taste he held is still natural and uncorrupted. But the people have not time for poetry, and his dream of an edition of his poems in the form of chap-books, to be eagerly bought from wandering hawkers, is still a dream. For his educated readers, who came to him in the expectation that he would give them a familiar pleasure, and "gratify certain known habits of association," he did all that in him lay. He warned them to abate these expectations and to put off this mood. When they neglected his advice he consoled himself with the thought that a poet must create the taste by which he is ultimately judged.

Here, surely, is ground enough for inquiry.

The critic who comes to his task with fixed principles and standards is already disqualified, in the opinion of Wordsworth himself, to appreciate the most characteristic merits of the poems. Either Wordsworth was the victim, during sixty years devoted wholly to poetry, of a lamentable illusion, or he has something to teach that will repay pupilage. He was a man of a steady mind, and the chance that he was not deceived seems to warrant an experiment. Such an experiment can take only one form. The critic must go back with him to the starting-point, and, by the aid of his own writings and the writings that throw light on his life and purposes, must watch his poems in the making.

A lifetime of strenuous poetic energy cannot be recaptured from oblivion or fully understood. But if the attempt be wholly vain and fantastic, then Wordsworth must be content to be judged by standards that he repudiated, and to be valued for reasons that have little to do with the inspiration and motive of his work.

CHAPTER I

CHILDHOOD AND EDUCATION

By his autobiographical poem, the *Prelude*, written between the thirtieth and the thirty-fifth years of his age, Wordsworth has released the critic from a world of conjecture and research. No such another authentic and minute poetic biography exists, it may safely be said, in any tongue. The genius of Wordsworth was a genius that naturally turned inward upon itself; and in this psychological account of the growth of his own mind, and of the most significant of the influences that shaped it, he has done the biographer's work once and for all. It would be foolish to challenge the truth of his account, and, so far as the critic's task is concerned, it would be vain to try to supplement it. He lived, it is true, for some forty-five years after the completion of the *Prelude*, and it is right that the chances and changes of that later time, the story of his various travels, and of the tardy honours that were heaped

upon him when he had ceased to sing, should, in fit place, be set down. For the understanding of his great poetic adventure, and for the appreciation of the wonderful passages in which that adventure was partly achieved, the history of his first thirty years is all that need be studied.

It is not merely that the formative period of a poet's life must always be the period of chief interest; in the life of Wordsworth no other period presents any interest at all. His life was meditative, uneventful, secluded, and, after its early passions and agonies, ran its course undiverted and unthwarted to the end. But the great passion that sealed him to poetry and opened his eyes on nature and man lost something of its virtue. The *Prelude*, as he says in the advertisement, "conducts the history of the Author's mind to the point when he was emboldened to hope that his faculties were sufficiently matured for entering upon the arduous labour which he had proposed to himself." But the labour itself, though time was not denied him, was never brought to completion. Nine years after the *Prelude* was finished there appeared the *Excursion*, and then—an end. The other two books that, together with the *Excursion*, were to make up the great philosophical poem on man, nature, and society, were barely attempted. One fragment of the first book remains, while as for the third book, "the materials of which it would have been

formed," as the author pathetically explains, "have been incorporated, for the most part," in his "other Publications written subsequently to the *Excursion*." The materials, that is to say, of the great Gothic Church, to which the *Prelude* was simply the Ante-chapel, were found useful for humbler domestic and parochial occasions, and the church was left unbuilt. The *Excursion*, great work though it be, is not greater than the *Prelude*, and adds to the *Prelude* much less of what is characteristic and vital than its bulk would lead the reader to expect. And with the *Excursion*, Wordsworth's work was done. By strange and hard ways he had been led up to the mount of vision, he had seen through a golden haze all the riches and the beauty of the land that was promised to Poetry, and then the vision faded; "the sudden charm which accidents of light and shade, which moonlight or sunset diffuse over a known and familiar landscape," was withdrawn, and he was left gazing on the woods and hills and pastures under the light of common day. Perhaps he hardly knew his loss, but the loss itself is witnessed by the altered tone of his voice. While he spoke only of what he saw, his speech was like the speech of one in a dream, musical, rapt, solemn, uncouth sometimes and stammering, but always intense, convinced, and absorbed in the novelty and wonder of his vision. In his later years he sees less and preaches more; he forages

in his memory for the best of his feelings, he expounds, declaims, argues even ; and, save once or twice, as in those lines "Composed upon an Evening of Extraordinary Splendour and Beauty," he does not again see the world illuminated by "the fountain light of all our day." He had been at one with Coleridge in poetic aim, and was at one with him also in poetic fate ; in both alike the high tide of inspiration was followed by a long and wandering ebb. Coleridge, we are often told, took opium ; but Wordsworth had no pleasant vices, and there is something other than accident in the brief course of a poetry so subtle and so elemental, so much dependent on a lofty tranquillity of mood and on

> Sensations sweet,
> Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,

so little dependent on intellectual craftsmanship and labour.

However this may be, the tale of Wordsworth's life, for the purposes of criticism, is the tale of his earlier years. He was born, the son of a country solicitor, at Cockermouth in 1770, fourteen years before the death of Samuel Johnson. His mother and father died during his childhood, and he was educated at the charge of his uncles, who sent him first to Hawkshead Grammar School, and then, at the age of seventeen, to St. John's College, Cambridge. While he was at the University the

French Revolution broke out, without at first attracting much of his interest or sympathy. But two visits to France, of which the first fell during the Summer Vacation of 1790, the second, and longer, after the completion of his course at Cambridge, drew him by degrees into the vortex of French politics. He was hastily recalled to England by his guardians in December 1792, and thereafter he drifted, or seemed to drift, without a practical plan for his life or his livelihood, labouring heavily in a dark sea of thought and passion. Some of his tentative juvenile verse was published by him at the beginning of 1793 in two small volumes, entitled *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*, and with their publication Wordsworth put behind him the fluent imitations of his boyhood. It is characteristic of the profundity and tenacity of his nature that he did not allow himself to be driven by the stress of circumstances into a profession, and that he would seek no escape from the miserable thoughts that haunted him until he could wrestle with them and defeat them on their own ground. Events in France were going from bad to worse, all the evil elements of human nature seemed triumphant, and the high morning hopes of those who had sought the happiness and the welfare of mankind had given victims to hate, dupes to fraud, and subjects to tyranny. Yet in the face of this mockery the

promulgators of moral maxims were busy vending their old wares, and Wordsworth, sick at heart and almost desperate, clung to his resolve to recognise no wisdom and no morality that left him without light in these dark places.

The practical problem of a livelihood was the first to be solved. By the bequest of £900 which came to him in 1795 from Raisley Calvert, he was put beyond the reach of penury, and the frugal housekeeping of himself and his sister was supplied for some seven or eight years. Thus, during the crucial period of his poetic production, Wordsworth, like Coleridge, Shelley, Tennyson, Browning, and most other poets who have won to fame, was free from the necessity of earning money. He settled at Racedown in Dorsetshire, where he wrote the *Borderers*, his single dramatic work; where also he worked out his deliverance from the long nightmare of doubt and horror that had oppressed his spirit. It was by no exploit of the reasoning powers that the deliverance came, but by casting back among the calm and deep memories of his childhood, and by throwing himself out into the simple daily life of the people around him. The grisly drama that was playing itself over and over again in his imagination, the drama of unjust tribunals and dungeons, and implements of death, and the laughter of mad crowds, was blown upon and

dissolved by a breath from the purer world and saner life that he had known and still recognised around him, so that nature and humanity were raised up to testify against their own aberrations. The world of eternal law, of custom, order, mutual service, and affectionate intercourse reasserted itself against the carnival of fever and passion that had run its race in France, and the perspective was changed; the noises of laughter and cursing were swallowed up in the quiet of the fields and the great spaces of the sky.

This hard-won victory was the crisis of Wordsworth's life. From this the best powers of his poetry were derived; the depth of consolation, the austere tenderness, and the strength as of iron that are felt in his greatest works came to him from the same source in experience. Had he lulled himself with opiates, or raised a panic-stricken optimistic twitter of protest against the awful facts that he was called upon to reckon with, he would never have attained to his unique position or fulfilled his allotted ministry as a poet.

He was helped by his sister Dorothy, who was of a gentler and more buoyant disposition, and of quicker and more agile perceptions than himself, and by his friend Coleridge, that

> capacious soul
> Placed on this earth to love and understand.

At Racedown and in the Quantocks in Somersetshire the three formed a kind of poetic fraternity. To his sister, who encouraged him to his task and brought him much material already more than half adapted to the uses of poetry, Wordsworth has fully and repeatedly expressed his sense of debt·—

Mine eyes did ne'er
Fix on a lovely object, nor my mind
Take pleasure in the midst of happy thoughts,
But either She whom now I have, who now
Divides with me this loved abode, was there,
Or not far off. Where'er my footsteps turned,
Her voice was like a hidden Bird that sang,
The thought of her was like a flash of light,
Or an unseen companionship, a breath
Of fragrance independent of the wind.

Concerning his debt to Coleridge he is less explicit; yet the debt was great, though it was more than paid in kind. Much of the best work of either poet took its origin from the companionship of 1797 and 1798. *Christabel*, the *Ancient Mariner*, the *Recluse*, *Peter Bell*, were schemed and partly executed in those years, and, more important still, the pieces included with *The Ancient Mariner* in the volume of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Talking much together, and always of poetry and its appanages, the two poets evolved a kind of theory of their art, which they afterwards developed on very divergent lines, and gave to the world in the preface to the second edition of the

Lyrical Ballads (1801) and in the *Biographia Literaria* (1817). After a brief period of travel in Germany the Wordsworths, in 1799, settled for life in the Lake country. Wordsworth's marriage in 1802, and the death of his brother John at sea in 1805, are the chief events of their earlier years there. "In 1813," says Wordsworth, "we came to Rydal Mount, where we have since lived with no further sorrow till 1836, when my sister became a confirmed invalid and our sister Sarah Hutchinson died." His life, as the years went by, was limited more and more to his immediate family circle, and his thoughts were almost wholly preoccupied with his poetic work. He had no intimate friends in these later years save those who clung to him as disciples. His lonely and intense brooding had once been fertilised, beneath indulgent skies, by intercourse with the minds of others; but now he toiled on single-handed, and jealously gleaned the last ears of a thrice-reaped harvest. He lived till 1850

To hear the world applaud the hollow ghost
That blamed the living man.

The significance and value of his biography for the appreciation of his poetry is therefore limited to certain periods and certain incidents of his life. In the following attempt at criticism it will be enough to take account of the influences of his

boyhood, of the mental crisis that he suffered during the events of the French Revolution, of the new poetry and the new theory of poetry that were born from the struggle, and of his relations to the only two persons who can claim any appreciable share in his poetic development, his sister, and his friend.

The story of Wordsworth's boyhood in the Lakes, so fully narrated by himself, is likely to be misread by those who forget that in the *Prelude* those long past events were all interpreted by the poet in the light of his later history. It was the belief, almost the discovery, of Wordsworth, that the memory, if it be habitually consulted, will not only supply a poet with his most valuable materials, but will also do for him the best part of his work. His famous definition of poetry is based on the workings of his own mind. "Poetry takes its origin," he says, "in emotion recollected in tranquillity; the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind." As an account of the genesis of his own poetry this is almost exhaustive. He indulged his memory with long periods of reverie, set it to travel to and fro among the past experiences of his

life, and loved solitude and indolence chiefly because during the lulls of social intercourse and intellectual labour lost impressions were recaptured. In the "long barren silence" that he loved he would sit watching his mind for the submerged feelings and images that of their own accord would rise and gleam for a moment at the surface. His own function, as it seemed to him, was simply that of a still and patient observer and chronicler :—

Nor is it I who play the part,
But a shy spirit in my heart,
That comes and goes—will sometimes leap
From hiding-places ten years deep ;
Or haunts me with familiar face,
Returning, like a ghost unlaid,
Until the debt I owe be paid.

He had acquired an art like that of the naturalist, the art of remaining perfectly motionless until the wild and timid creatures of his mind came about him. A large part of his poetry is taken up with these resuscitated feelings. He cherished them and pondered over them, comparing them with the kindred but different emotions that accompanied their revival. In his inner life they count for so much, that when he meets with some new vivid and joyful experience his mind naturally springs forward to anticipate the time when this, too, shall be added to the treasures of memory.

Nor was it only the keen and deep emotions of the past that thus came to have a poetic value. The intensity of the life of his senses in his earlier days, if it were not insisted on by himself, would be sufficiently witnessed by the oddities and trivialities that were sometimes presented to him by his memory, and reverently accepted. The remark has often been made, in one shape or another, that in his own collection of thoughts, or reminiscences, or poems, Wordsworth did not know a gem from a pebble. It is true; or rather, since some of the best gems of his finding had been kicked aside as worthless by previous seekers, he had learned to distrust the usual methods of distinction, and would never give a judgment against a pebble, especially if it was his own property. A sincere account of a real experience was never valueless in his eyes. Hence his conversation and his writing ignored the accepted distinctions between the trivial and the profound, between general topics and those that are slighted because their interest is said to be purely personal. Sir Henry Taylor, who met him in London in 1835, describes his conversation: "He keeps tumbling out the highest and deepest thoughts that the mind of man can reach, in a stream of discourse which is so oddly broken by the little hitches and interruptions of common life that we admire and laugh at him by turns." The notes dictated by the poet to Miss Fenwick have

the same character. His note on the *White Doe of Rylstone*, beside some of the most luminous things ever said on the methods of his own poetry, records how he rubbed the skin off his heel by wearing too tight a shoe and how he sought and obtained relief. And this insensibility to vulgar contrasts, this whole-hearted preoccupation with his own experiences, this absolute candour and complete freedom from critical self-consciousness, or, to put it otherwise, this lack of humour and this almost superstitious egotism, might be easily and abundantly illustrated from his poems.

All memories, then, had either an inherent or a potential value for Wordsworth; and the *Prelude* is one long exercise of memory, reaching back over the gulf that separated him, in the first flush of his power and maturity, from his younger self. He is throughout punctiliously careful not to confuse his present with his former emotions. He knows that the light in which he sees his early days is a light half reflected on them, but his readers seldom follow him carefully enough to make the distinction. They miss the clearest of his guidance in their search for the marvellous boy of popular biography. Of all great men Wordsworth was the furthest in childhood from resembling the compact and talented little gentleman that they seek. The *Prelude* is the story of the process whereby, out of the ordinary vague stuff of human nature,

under the stress of fate, there was moulded a poet. It was the best of clay, full of kindly qualities, very tenacious of the forms impressed on it, but something like it is plentiful enough in any healthy human society. A poet—the lesson is still Wordsworth's own—is to be had for the making; and the secret of the making, if ever it should be divined, would be found, according to his conception of it, exactly at that point where the free and vigorous life of sense and thought in any young creature is, by some predestined accident or series of accidents, arrested, surprised, checked, challenged, and turned in and back upon itself. Then for the first time the soul makes an inventory of its wealth, and discovers that it has great possessions, that it has been a traveller in fairyland, and holds the clue to that mystery. With the discovery the period of acquisition closes, or at least the incomings thenceforward are slower, less authentic, more liable to sophistication, and the newly awakened poet is left to make the best of what he has saved from the days when, all unwittingly, he enjoyed a royal revenue.

There was nothing Wordsworthian, so to say, about the boy Wordsworth. Among the hills and valleys of his native place he led a healthy life of sport and adventure, driven by the goad that stirs young animal nature into wild activity. He took birds' nests—for the eggs; hired and

rode horses, when the accumulations of his pocket-money warranted the unusual expense—for the sport, and read books—for the story. Something wilful and passionate he was, with a strong sense, as he remarks in the note on his most famous ode, of the indomitableness of the spirit within him. But these very qualities saved him, both at Hawkshead and at Cambridge, from the tyranny of routine and the dreary artificiality of educational devices, and left his development to the charge of instinct. And no doubt the tasks and punishments of a school perform a useful function if they curb the self-indulgence of bad poets, leaving the good, who are almost always wilful, to follow their untamed impulses.

His reading, both at school and college, was large in amount, and was of that most profitable kind which is called desultory. He read fairy stories, the *Arabian Nights*, Fielding's novels, *Don Quixote*, *Gil Blas*, and fell in love with Swift, whose grave, ironic romancing, by a singular coincidence, harmonises exactly with the serious make-believe of a child. Of the authors to whom he was more formally introduced at school he hardly makes mention. His interests were divided between the sports of his open-air life and the imaginative world that he found in the books of his pastime, which he read not philosophically, but in good faith and complete self-abandonment. In

this widening of the world of experience and this loosening of the bonds of reality he found, when he looked back upon it, the chief gain of his early reading. We have no record of his maturer and more critical verdict upon Tom Jones and Sancho Panza, for in his later years Wordsworth read little or nothing. The best of his poetic impulse had come to him from Nature through the gates of the senses, and to the end he is found knocking at the closed portals through which he had once seen Paradise. There was loss in this, but perhaps it was inevitable. The business of supervising his son's Latin studies at school furnished him with one of his rare literary inspirations, but did not permanently modify his poetic method. He had tasted the spirit of poetry at its pure mountain source, and would no doubt have felt it treason to fall back for good upon any second-hand expedient. Of the amassing of knowledge and the perfecting of craftsmanship he had always thought lightly ; so that from these exercises of the mind, which abide and progress when the hey-day is over in the blood and the senses are dulled by use, he derived no consolation in his old age. He had undervalued Art, and Art, which is long, took its slow revenge upon him. But Nature, who "never did betray the heart that loved her," stayed near him to the end.

For his education in the technical accomplish-

ment of verse Wordsworth was indebted chiefly to his earlier years. When his calling had come to him, he thought disparagingly, even suspiciously, of his early delight in metre and music and the intricacies of poetic workmanship. Yet his testimony to the attraction that these things had for him is clear and explicit. Speaking of his tenth year,

My mind (he says),
With conscious pleasure opened to the charm
Of words in tuneful order, found them sweet
For their own *sakes*, a passion, and a power;
And phrases pleased me, chosen for delight,
For pomp, or love.

Yet this first love, when he looked back upon it, seemed to him to have been fraught with danger. "I always feel some apprehension," he wrote, later in life, to Edward Moxon, "for the destiny of those who in youth addict themselves to the composition of verse." The "trade in classic niceties" misled him, he says, from the true standards of natural speech and natural feeling, and encouraged "a wilfulness of fancy and conceit" at the expense of the purer imagination. So too, for a time, he judged the beauty of Nature by the laws of the picturesque—

Even in pleasure pleased
Unworthily, disliking here, and there
Liking, by rules of mimic art transferred
To things above all art.

The conclusion of the whole matter is stated in those lines towards the end of the *Prelude* where the poet breaks out in protest against the vanity of verbal education, and declares himself

> convinced at heart
> How little those formalities, to which
> With overweening trust alone we give
> The name of Education, have to do
> With real feeling and just sense; how vain
> A correspondence with the talking world
> Proves to the most.

When he was more than seventy years old he was impelled, he says, "by the disgusting frequency with which the word *artistical*, imported with other impertinences from the Germans, is employed by writers of the present day," to compose the sonnet beginning

> A Poet!—He hath put his heart to school;

so that the old prophet continued impenitent to the end.

Protests like this last, directed against the weary cant of technical criticism, have, of course, been uttered by many writers; among others by Goethe. But it is not easy to match this case of a great poet who pays scant respect to the formal aspects of his craft, and who distrusts his own boyhood because it delighted in melody and choice diction and gorgeous phrasing. Wordsworth, it

cannot be too early stated, was a pure spiritualist in poetry, and disliked poetic ritual, not for itself, but for its power to overlay and endanger the simple and delicate processes of the soul.

The consequences of his resolute spiritualism are seen in his poetic history. Poetry is "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge," but it is blown through instruments of human devising, complex and various. Wordsworth of course knew this; more than once, in his letters, he expresses his conviction that "poetry is infinitely more of an art than the world is disposed to believe." But when his message came to him, and his eyes were opened upon a new heaven and a new earth, the instruments that he had learned to handle in his childhood seemed to him to be feeble and false. The music of the spheres asked for a larger, simpler expression, and the poet set himself to devise it. Here and there he succeeds, and finds his own incomparable, bleak, noble style. But the memories and admirations and habits of his childhood reasserted themselves, so that his style and his thought were never thoroughly adapted to each other; he never had a sure touch with language. In many passages of his poetry, some of them among the most admired, he is a pensioner upon the art of others, and even in the *Excursion* the sentiments of Wordsworth often come clothed, against the doctrine of Wordsworth,

in the phrase and manner of Shakespeare. If these passages were indeed the best of his gifts to English poetry, this little treatise would be idle. His theory of poetic diction has been attacked as an inadequate explanation of his own poetry. So far as that attack is directed only to compelling admiration for kinds of poetic expression other than Wordsworth's best, it is completely successful. No one can deny that the much-quoted stanza from the *Affliction of Margaret* is fine poetry :—

> Perhaps some dungeon hears thee groan,
> Maimed, mangled by inhuman men;
> Or thou upon a desert thrown
> Inheritest the lion's den;
> Or hast been summoned to the deep,
> Thou, thou and all thy mates, to keep
> An incommunicable sleep.

But even the sonorous roll and pomp of that verse cannot overwhelm the purer and more wonderful beauty of the verse that follows later in the same poem, where Wordsworth's theory is illustrated in the best of his own practice :—

> My apprehensions come in crowds;
> I dread the rustling of the grass;
> The very shadows of the clouds
> Have power to shake me as they pass:
> I question things and do not find
> One that will answer to my mind;
> And all the world appears unkind.

Poetry like this is not to be produced voluminously in a single lifetime, and although he clung stubbornly to his old doctrine, in his later work he fell back more and more on the poetic and rhetorical devices that had charmed his boyhood.

The vastly more important education of his feelings, passions, and receptive powers was (he lived to teach it) the work of Nature. Behind and around the activities of his boyhood there was spread the solemn theatre of Nature—"a temperate show of objects that endure." The work of Wordsworth in poetry might be compared, not unjustly, with the kindred art of Corot and Millet and the modern school of French painters. He brought the background of human life into true and vital relation with the smaller interests and incidents that monopolise most men's attention. He emancipated the eye from the utilitarian preferences that have been imposed on it by the necessities of the struggle for life, whereby things in motion, things near, things dangerous, things whose behaviour cannot be certainly predicted, are allowed to annul all consideration of the great visions and presences which stand around, and watch, and judge. He fixed his attention on the wide spaces of earth and sky, and against that calm unresting expanse he learned to see men as trees walking. And although his intercourse with beauty old as creation was at first almost uncon-

scious, he attributed a chief influence over the growth of his genius to the work of these ministering powers. There are many passages of poetic rapture in the *Prelude* where the debt is acknowledged, and some prosaic passages, more useful for the present purpose, where the doctrine is stated :—

Attention springs,
And comprehensiveness and memory flow
From early converse with the works of God
Among all regions ; chiefly where appear
Most obviously simplicity and power.

It is not that the works of God among cities and crowded communities are less worthy of study ; but they are more difficult to read. They too will come to be seen in the same clear and large light by him whose eye has been trained in the quiet places of Nature—

Who looks
In steadiness, who hath among least things
An undersense of greatest ; sees the parts
As parts, but with a feeling of the whole.

To be surrounded in childhood by the larger aspects of Nature, to have them visible, a daily sight, is in itself, according to Wordsworth, the greater part of education. The eagernesses and impulses of his own boyish life he judged

Not vain
Nor profitless, if haply they impressed
Collateral objects and appearances,

Albeit lifeless then, and doomed to sleep
Until maturer seasons called them forth
To impregnate and elevate the mind.

The very excitement which, in early life, absorbs the powers of the mind is found, long after it has passed away, to have acted as a mnemonic; just as any acute physical pain suffered amidst beautiful scenery often serves to stamp the image of that beauty on the memory with singular vividness and persistence, when the pain itself has become an indifferent and purely intellectual reminiscence. The flogging of boys, as a means of impressing on them the rules of the Latin grammar, has been advocated on the same grounds by psychologists of time past. They were right in attributing an impressive virtue to a flogging, though there seems to be no guarantee that the rules of the Latin grammar are what will be impressed. Wordsworth, who, in his vocation as a poet, made it his business to investigate "the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement," never ceased to be grateful to his teacher Nature for the discipline that set his own hungers and fears and wild impulses to flog him in his childhood, so that the forms and images of the high, enduring things that stood around him were branded into his mind and heart for ever.

Both in the *Prelude* and in the *Lines written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey* he is careful to

distinguish the several stages of his education by Nature, and the several phases of his love for her. During the first of these stages, he says, Nature was

> But secondary to my own pursuits
> And animal activities, and all
> Their trivial pleasures.

These activities and pleasures by degrees lost their charm, yet his love of Nature, for her own sake, at the same time grew deep and intense :—

> The props of my affections were removed,
> And yet the building stood, as if sustained
> By its own spirit! All that I beheld
> Was dear, and hence to finer influxes
> The mind lay open to a more exact
> And close communion.

This second phase of his love for Nature baffled his own powers of description :—

> I cannot paint
> What then I was. The sounding cataract
> Haunted me like a passion : the tall rock,
> The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
> Their colours and their forms, were then to me
> An appetite ; a feeling and a love,
> That had no need of a remoter charm,
> By thought supplied, or any interest
> Unborrowed from the eye.

And it lasted, by his own account, until he was more than two and twenty—that is to say, until the fever of political thought and passion drove it out.

When the crisis was past, the love of Nature returned to him, but shorn of its old despotism; it was subdued to a dominant scheme of thought, and became fellow-inmate in his mind with the love of man, and with a deep sense of the pathos of things.

The roots of Wordsworth's poetic mysticism drew their life from this virgin passion. He falters and apologises whenever he attempts to describe it. Yet some passages in the *Prelude* give help to those who can piece them out with the memory of their own experiences. It was a despotism of the senses that held sway over him, a life of the senses so strong and full and exclusive that all other emotions save the joy of the eye in seeing, and of the ear in hearing, seemed dull and irrelevant. The mere joy of seeing contained all things in itself, without the tedious glosses supplied by comparison and thought. Like the religious enthusiasts of the East, Wordsworth sought in fixed and passionate contemplation for admission to the heart of things. And this method of intuition, which became habitual to him in the prime of life, took its origin in the self-sufficient vitality of his youthful senses and perceptions:—

> I roamed from hill to hill, from rock to rock,
> Still craving combinations of new forms,
> New pleasure, wider empire for the sight,
> Proud of her own endowments, and rejoiced
> To lay the inner faculties asleep.

Nature herself—as he remarks in a passage which breaks off suddenly in the midst of a metaphysical argument—Nature herself employs means to thwart this tyranny of the several senses by setting each of them to counteract the other, and by subduing each, in its highest developments, to the powers of the will and the intellect. His thraldom to the objects of sight, though it seemed to spring from causes "inherent in the creature," is lamented by Wordsworth as an intoxication, an excess incident to youth. Women, he says, escape it; with them the heart governs the eye, not the eye the heart; and he tells of one whom he knew (Mary Hutchinson, who became his wife), how—

> Wise as women are
> When genial circumstance hath favoured them,
> She welcomed what was given, and craved no more.

The same difference of character in the sexes is noted by Chaucer in his tale of the Princess Canace—

> She was ful mesurable, as wommen be;

and when the revellers were preparing to turn night into day, she thought of the necessities of the morrow, and took leave of her father to go to rest. But this measurable disposition, though it is the soul of wisdom and sanity, is not the begetter of poetry. If Wordsworth's transports of affection for the sights and sounds of Nature were,

as he says, not profound, they were strong enough to survive the clash with thought, and to take on new life in more fruitful and enduring forms.

So far as the tale of his early converse with Nature can be disengaged from the reflection and argument in which he swathes it, the impression it makes is the same throughout. It is a tale of a smothered fire, of fierce loves and wild feasts of the senses celebrated in solitude, of superstitious fears, and of joy so jealous of control that it shuns all contact with thought. But the malady of thought is an inevitable malady, and there is no good immunity from it to be had by shunning the infection. The escape from it is only for those whose system it has permeated; they alone may dare to hold it cheap. When Wordsworth depreciates the ardours and passions of his youth, it is because, looking back on them, he sees the peril of the course they have yet to run, and vainly dreams of precautions that might be taken to save them from the long disease that lies in wait for them. But this is to wish them weaker, and it was by their strength that they survived. When he became an apostle, with the joy of life for his gospel, the experiences of his early unthinking days gave him matter for his most moving and heart-felt discourses. An earlier ordination would have robbed him of half his message.

CHAPTER II

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION: COLERIDGE

At a time when the study of literary influences, the influence of nation on nation, of poet on poet, of book on book, threatens to claim the whole field of literary history, the case of Wordsworth has a special interest. The rainbow of Romanticism has been unweaved; the imports of Romanticism have been traced to the places of their growth. One man read Shakespeare; another buried himself in Northern mythology; a third, weary of the monotony of his own good sense and sound judgment, brought drugs and perfumes from the East. A whole tribe of workers busied themselves with the resuscitation of the ideas and arts of the Middle Ages. And it cannot be denied that the Middle Ages, misunderstood, in its own way and for its own purposes, by the Eighteenth Century, furnished the most picturesque part of its outfit to the Romantic Revival. Of all literary influences in the England of the close of

the century Percy's *Reliques* was incomparably the most powerful. But the complex machinery of loans, imports, bequests, letters of credit, and orders of affiliation does not in the end explain Romanticism. The compass of human expression is limited; the variations of human thought are, after all, slight variations; and an age that seeks expression for its philosophy is always to be found wisely foraging in the storehouse of the past. Its philosophy, nevertheless, is its own, and, unless it is no better than a foolish imitation, derives from experience of life. One and the same tendency of thought and feeling, resulting from the pressure of a single age and civilisation on the eternal motives of human nature, is manifested in many minds at the same time; and then, and then only, does the search for expression begin.

It is the interest of Wordsworth's career, studied as an episode in literary history, that it takes us at once to the root of the matter, and shows us the genesis of poetry from its living material, without literary intermediary. The influence of the *Reliques*, the reaction from the "gaudy and inane phraseology" of the school of Pope, though both are to be reckoned with, are symptoms merely, indications of the natural affinities and differences of a poetry which sprang neither from imitation nor from disgust. The

dominant passion of Wordsworth's life owed nothing to books. There was for him no question of the return to Nature; he had never deserted her. There was a question, nevertheless, akin to this, suggested by the events of his own time, which he wrestled with and solved. The horrors of the French Revolution cast a doubt on the legitimacy of his youthful joys and discoloured his view of human nature. When he regained his delight in nature and his faith in man, and taught that delight and that faith to others, it was a triumph for the deepest of the feelings that had given strength and vogue to the doctrine of Rousseau, the father of the literary Romantics. So it is that Wordsworth's poetic career is a history of Romanticism in epitome. The country-bred youth was marked by fate to be the champion of the ideas that turned the current of European thought; and while those ideas were struggling darkly and confusedly in the arena of the Revolution, soiled with dust and blood, he was winning for them a pure and lasting victory elsewhere. His simple fidelity to his memories and his severe devotion to truth earned him his success where others, more sumptuously equipped, had been betrayed by the deceits of the heart. If Rousseau had survived to witness the Revolution, would he have kept the kernel of his faith; or would he rather have been found, blinded by clouds of vanity

and sentiment, urging on the murderous fury of the mob?

The Revolution, in its earlier phases, involved no revolution in Wordsworth's mental life. In common with a large number of his countrymen, he accepted it gladly, and expected for its principles a peaceful and beneficent triumph. The societies with which he had been most familiar in his youth were, as he explains, essentially democratic in their basis. Among the dalesmen of Cumberland there reigned an absolute equality. The sole distinguished individual of each of these valley communities was their minister, who, except on the Sabbath day, differed not at all in clothing or in manner of life from themselves. "Everything else, person and possession, exhibited a perfect equality, a community of shepherds and agriculturists, proprietors, for the most part, of the lands which they occupied and cultivated." At Cambridge, again, he found that strong infusion of democratic principles which from the first has been the mark of university life—

> All stood thus far
> Upon equal ground; that we were brothers all
> In honour, as in one community,
> Scholars and gentlemen.

Political problems were almost indifferent to him; they seemed cold and theoretic; and history

was valued only as another form of fiction, a collection of tales that

> made the heart
> Beat high, and filled the fancy with fair forms.

Even after his first visit to France his attitude was little changed. The walking tour in Switzerland that he adventured with his friend Robert Jones took him on foot through France, going and returning. When he saw the Brabant armies making ready for war, he says,

> I looked upon these things
> As from a distance; heard, and saw, and felt,
> Was touched, but with no intimate concern.

The joy of life and the sure and easy faith in a glorious outcome for the new spirit of fraternity possessed him, to the exclusion of reflection. Kings had never impressed his imagination, and he was willing to do without them.

The record of this first visit to France supplies an interesting comment on the usual conception of Wordsworth's character. He was naturally, he says, of a violent, impulsive, and passionate disposition. But to most of those who make acquaintance with him he is known as the solitary of the Lakes, the embodiment of mild wisdom and gentle precept, who was to be seen day by day wandering on the public roads muttering to himself. Many of his critics find in him too little of

qualities of the beast of prey which seem essential to a full manhood, too much of the patient agrarian animal, grazing and ruminating. His own comparison between the nightingale and the stock-dove lends itself to this conception. The fierce and tumultuous song of the nightingale appeals to him less than the homely tale of the dove :—

> He cooed, and cooed ;
> And somewhat pensively he wooed :
> He sang of love, with quiet blending,
> Slow to begin, and never ending ;
> Of serious faith, and inward glee ;
> That was the song—the song for me !

This studied quietness and self-control were not habitual with him from the first. The enthusiasm of his younger heart in greeting the Revolution was like the aching joys and dizzy raptures that filled him in the presence of Nature. Both in the history recorded in the *Prelude* and in the account given in the *Excursion* of how the Solitary was awakened from the despondency of his bereavement there is evidence enough of the buoyancy and fervour of his early years. When he and his friend first landed in France the national rejoicings,

> Songs, garlands, mirth,
> Banners, and happy faces, far and nigh,

captured all his ardour for the cause :—

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very Heaven! O times
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
Of custom, law, and statute took at once
The attraction of a country in romance!

The pair of romantic adventurers was ready to share in all the festivity of the time. At Lyons they fell in with a company of delegates returning from Paris, and sailed with them down the Rhone.

In this proud company
We landed—took with them our evening meal,
Guests welcome almost as the angels were
To Abraham of old. The supper done,
With flowing cups elate and happy thoughts
We rose at signal given, and formed a ring,
And, hand in hand, danced round and round the board;
All hearts were open, every tongue was loud
With amity and glee; . . .
And round and round the board we danced again.

Those who knew him only when his youth was past were never privileged to hear Wordsworth boisterous with wine and mirth, or to see him keeping revel by dancing round and round the supper table. Perhaps, twenty-five years later, the memory of this gleeful scene helped him to his spirited defence of the convivial exaltation of Tam o' Shanter, as drawn by Burns. "Permit me to remind you," he says in his *Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns*, "that it is the privilege of poetic genius to catch, under certain restrictions, of which,

perhaps, at the time of its being exerted it is but dimly conscious, a spirit of pleasure wherever it can be found—in the walks of nature and in the business of men. The poet, trusting to primary instincts, luxuriates among the felicities of love and wine, and is enraptured while he describes the fairer aspects of war; nor does he shrink from the company of the passion of love though immoderate—from convivial pleasure though intemperate—nor from the presence of war though savage, and recognised as the handmaid of desolation." In society as well as in nature Wordsworth had learned the secret of whole-hearted pleasure; and when he came to theory he boldly insisted, in spite of a didactic age, on the single necessity laid on every poet, the necessity of giving pleasure. For himself—and he never was tired of telling it—he found that

> Pleasure is spread through the earth
> In stray gifts, to be claimed by whoever shall find;

and his own zest was so keen that his youth, it might plausibly be said, burned itself out prematurely, and delivered him over to a prolonged, majestic middle age.

From November 1791 onward Wordsworth was in France again for more than a year. He held introductions to aristocratic society, but, growing weary of a conversation that busied itself with anything rather than the living interests of

the day, he soon sought the acquaintance of the patriots. Now at last he came to close quarters with the suffering that everywhere underlay the Revolution, and with the thoughts and designs of its friends. He formed a close friendship with Michael Beaupuis, an officer, nobly born, some fifteen years his senior, whose tenderness, meekness, gallantry, and utter devotion to the cause of the people are celebrated in glowing language in the *Prelude*. With Beaupuis he spent the early summer months of 1792, on the banks of the Loire. They talked of many things; of history and the heroes of the ancient states, of philosophy and the regeneration of the people. In the ever-present consciousness that Beaupuis was pledged to serve the national cause with his life, Wordsworth felt that these questions had passed out of the domain of theory, that politics had suddenly become real and all-important. The miseries of the old order were brought home to him in like fashion. He must tell it in his own words :—

When we chanced
One day to meet a hunger-bitten girl,
Who crept along fitting her languid gait
Unto a heifer's motion, by a cord
Tied to her arm, and picking thus from the lane
Its sustenance, while the girl with pallid hands
Was busy knitting in a heartless mood
Of solitude, and at the sight my friend
In agitation said, "'Tis against *that*

> That we are fighting," I with him believed
> That a benignant spirit was abroad
> Which might not be withstood, that poverty
> Abject as this would in a little time
> Be found no more, that we should see the earth
> Unthwarted in her wish to recompense
> The meek, the lowly, patient child of toil,
> All institutes for ever blotted out
> That legalised exclusion, empty pomp
> Abolished, sensual state and cruel power,
> Whether by edict of the one or few;
> And finally, as sum and crown of all,
> Should see the people having a strong hand
> In framing their own laws; whence better days
> To all mankind.

Wordsworth was not quick at seizing on occasions for sentiment. The inner life of his thought and emotion was protected by a natural rampart of reserve and self-absorption from the lighter intrusions of pity and sympathy. He could look on the seething life of London with a glazed philosophic eye, and find in that confused theatre of pleasure and pain no more than the tumbling of so many marionettes. Before it could touch him near, an experience had to be simple and isolated. But when once a scene or attitude of human life caught his attention and wakened his pity, the impression was deep and lasting. The picture haunted him when his eyes were shut; the drama possessed his heart and brain, and enacted itself over and over again with labour and

suffering. He could not put it behind him without the promise of a satisfactory solution. So when he saw the girl with the heifer in the lane he clutched the more eagerly at the Revolutionary creed. He believed that a benignant spirit was abroad; and the September massacres were the comment of destiny on that belief. He expected to see the power of the one or few abolished; and Napoleon arose to mock his expectations. He believed that in a little time the extreme of poverty would be found no more; and some ten years later he met the leech-gatherer at Grasmere. He had far to travel in those ten years; from the fallacious vanities of the reformer and the large, easy hopes of the philanthropist to the humility of the mind that was to seek comfort for itself from the old man on the moor. The length of the journey is a measure of Wordsworth's spiritual progress; in that later meeting he no longer indulges himself with large dreams of benefaction; humanity has risen in his esteem, and has become his teacher and consoler:—

> I could have laughed myself to scorn to find
> In that decrepit man so firm a mind.
> "God," said I, "be my help and stay secure;
> I'll think of the leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!"

In the meantime, after the September massacres, he was back in Paris alone, wandering about the

city, imagining the furious scenes that had filled it so lately, studying in his attic-room, and agitating his mind so incessantly that his troubled dreams gained the force of hallucinations. He was about to seek an issue for his long vicarious sufferings by allying himself definitely with one of the Revolutionary parties when his recall came, and he returned unwillingly to London, there to continue to brood over the unfolding tragedy as a passive spectator. When he looked back, in after years, on these events he recognised that, had he been left to his own devices, he must have been drawn into the rapids :—

> Doubtless, I should have then made common cause
> With some who perished ; haply perished too,
> A poor mistaken and bewildered offering,—
> Should to the breast of Nature have gone back,
> *With all my resolutions, all my hopes,*
> A Poet only to myself.

The timely and decisive mandate of his guardians saved him, if not from an early death, at least from committing himself to a programme. The consequence was that from first to last he watched the Revolution with other eyes than those of a partisan. He was forbidden to act, but he saw and suffered the more. It was while these long years of painful thought still lay heavy on his spirit that he wrote these lines in the *Borderers*—

Action is transitory—a step, a blow,
The motion of a muscle—this way or that—
'Tis done, and in the after-vacancy
We wonder at ourselves like men betrayed :
Suffering is permanent, obscure, and dark,
And shares the nature of infinity.

A great crisis in human affairs usually closes the education of those who bear a part in it. They make their choice by the best of their lights, and then, whether they win or lose, pride does the rest. And this danger besets especially all democratic leaders. The people rarely has good friends; those who are readiest with their services commonly settle down, after a hot fit of generous impulse in youth, to befriend their own ideas and to vindicate their own history. Devotion to the people gives much freer play to a man's conceit than devotion to a person can ever do. The friend of the people often feels no reverence for the objects of his affection; he is arrogant, opinionative, and amazingly slow to recognise in them an intelligence and virtue equal to his own. Accustomed as he is to speaking for his big vague client, he drops out of the habit of considering himself as a private person, and obliterates all individual sincerity under a mass of statistics and principles. Hence he loses touch with reality, and leads in the end a purely artificial existence as lieutenant to an abstraction, without the advantage

of the corrections that a flesh and blood master might give.

Now Wordsworth loved the people almost as others love persons, with the same admiration and reverential tenderness. His natural affections and his strong instinctive appreciation of the things that are deepest and most real in human nature rescued him from the pitfalls of the politician. His honour had not been irredeemably engaged to a party or a line of action, his deepest concern was still truth, and his enormous capacity for open-eyed endurance enabled him to make of those years of disaster and chaos a period of probation, a furnace for the tempering of his new affections.

The furnace was fierce, and his pride struggled long and hard. When Great Britain declared war on the French Republic he suffered a shock, he says, that threw him out of the pale of love, and soured and corrupted his feelings upwards to the source. When prayers for victory were offered up in the churches he sat silent among the congregation, and "fed on the day of vengeance yet to come." And, worse than this, the foothold of his sympathies on the other side was steadily being undermined. The best blood of France had been spilt on the scaffold, and among the victims were many of the chiefs whom he admired and had been willing to follow. The war for liberty was changed by its own success into a war for con-

quest, and the French appeared as the oppressors of humbler peoples. Yet still Wordsworth, angry and stubborn, clung to his old tenets, as if they were "the very being of the immortal soul."

The violence of the shock he suffered may be judged from this, that now for a time he sought refuge in the arid rationalism of the day, best exemplified in England by the newly published work of William Godwin. The system that makes the gymnastic Reason sole governor of human life, and submits, or attempts to submit, to its impartial control all social and personal relations and affections, was congenial to many barren, dexterous little minds, who found in it, indeed, the basis of their sympathy with the Revolution. Wordsworth's sympathy with the Revolution had a widely different origin, and it was only by stress of weather, and from the dire need of reinforcement for his faith, that he was driven into that harbour. He had trusted to the event to vindicate his belief in the inherent purity and goodness of human nature, and the event had failed him. The feelings and passions of men had played him false, but the doctrine might yet be saved if those feelings and passions could only be regarded as "infirmities of nature, time, and place," to be shaken off by a regenerated humanity. The modes of mathematical thought, exhibiting all things under the forms of necessity, always had a

distant fascination for his mind; and now he set himself to apply them to the whole frame of social life, to test by them all the motives and standards of human action.

The result is described by himself:—

> Demanding formal *proof*,
> And seeking it in everything, I lost
> All feeling of conviction, and, in fine,
> Sick, wearied out with contrarieties,
> Yielded up moral questions in despair.

But for his own explicit statement, it would be difficult to believe that a scheme of thought like that of the *Political Justice* could ever have established an ascendancy over his mind. In the *Prelude* he shows himself well aware of the weaknesses of a system which gave license to fanatic zeal under the guise of sober reason, and which flattered youthful pride of intellect by allowing it to hold itself superior to the shackles of custom and the claims of natural feeling. Already, in 1795, when he planned the tragedy of the *Borderers*, he exhibited in his philosophic villain, Oswald, all the practical dangers of the creed. His own attachment to the doctrine of Godwin was brief and almost experimental in its nature—an experiment of despair. The result was inevitable; his life of feeling and thought was plunged into chaos. The spirit of Shelley, compact of fire and air, could

find sustenance for a time in the wilderness of Godwin's thought. But a nature like Wordsworth's, rooted in personal memories and local pieties, slow of growth and sensitive in every fibre of its affections, could not without mortal violence be reduced to a geometric pattern or transplanted to a frozen climate. The very attempt was a sufficient refutation of the theory, and from that time forth Wordsworth never again put his trust in the reasonings of political philosophy. Standing in that Churchyard among the Mountains which was the academy of his loftiest teaching, he utters the conviction that had been forced upon him by the struggles of his youth :—

> Earth is sick,
> And Heaven is weary, of the hollow words
> Which States and Kingdoms utter when they talk
> Of truth and justice.

He turned away from politics : it was only by slow degrees that he won his way out to poetry. His depression was not so great as to make him forswear all study ; but he put aside all branches of study that involve that element of disease and uncertainty, human nature, and devoted himself to abstract science. His long feverish dream of abstract thought was thus no longer peopled with unhappy figures ; and, after a time, by the gentle influence of his sister, who was now living with him, and by the natural operation of the

daily interests and sights of country life, the dream was broken; the outer world reasserted itself, and the things that he had loved in his childhood came back cool and sweet upon his senses. It was his sister, he says, who restored him to his true self and preserved him for poetry. Old trains of feeling and old memories by her aid were recaptured; by infection from her he caught zest in the little observations, and pleasures, and solicitudes of daily existence, so that the tribute which he pays to her in the poem called the *Sparrow's Nest* was earned over again:—

> The Blessing of my later years
> Was with me when a boy:
> She gave me eyes, she gave me ears;
> And humble cares, and delicate fears;
> A heart, the fountain of sweet tears;
> And love, and thought, and joy.

This restoration of the life of the senses after the dark tyranny of a life of abstract thought is the turning-point of Wordsworth's career. To understand it is to have the key to his poetry and to his theories concerning the function of poetry. Even the question of poetic diction takes its meaning and interest from this crisis, when the world of common perception came back upon the man like a revelation, and the forms of daily speech seemed fraught with inexhaustible meaning. Henceforward the searchings of the intellect and

all the apparatus of means and ends are discredited and done with, swallowed up in the mere wonder of living. He sits, as by Esthwaite lake, in the mood described in his own *Expostulation*:—

> You look round on your Mother Earth,
> As if she for no purpose bore you;
> As if you were her first-born birth,
> And none had lived before you.

Poetry to Wordsworth meant this mood of wonder and acceptance and delight, whereby the intellectual questionings of the mind are, if not finally set at rest, reduced to their just dimensions, and seen, as a mode of human activity, in a larger perspective. The world, which the intellect had vainly attempted to subdue to a system, is resolved, in the twinkling of an eye, by this new method of consideration, to harmony and peace.

The thing almost defies explanation, for since the change that made the poet was the discovery of a new way of seeing and feeling, the categories of a language that has been hammered into shape for the purposes of thinking, reasoning, and expounding are quite beside the mark. Beneath all Wordsworth's theory and practice of poetry there lies a profound mysticism, a distrust of all rational process. The difficulty is his own, no less than his critic's; he found language ill-suited to be the vehicle of his message, and after a few years of heroic effort to convert it to his uses, after some

splendid half-successes which give him his unique place in English poetry, and some brave futile attempts at a forlorn hope, he bowed to defeat and subdued his hand to what it worked in. Even in the marvellous Twelfth Book of the *Prelude*, where he endeavours to explain the nature of the change that came over him, he works only by hints and indirections; his subject eludes him, and he chases it through the scenes and memories that had been glorified by its momentary presence:—

> The days gone by
> Return upon me almost from the dawn
> Of life: the hiding-places of man's power
> Open; I would approach them, but they close.
> I see by glimpses now; when age comes on,
> May scarcely see at all; and I would give,
> While yet we may, as far as words can give,
> Substance and life to what I feel, enshrining,
> Such is my hope, the spirit of the Past
> For future restoration.

So difficult is it to set in words a true account of this matter, that the way is left open for any objector who cares to maintain that here is a mighty pother about a very simple and ordinary occurrence. A young man puzzles his brains over problems of government and society, he distresses himself with too deep a sense of responsibility for the right conduct of the Universe, and falls into a morbid and irritable state. But he is

blest with a sound constitution, good lungs, and equable heart, so that time works his cure, and he suddenly realises, with a sense of surprise, that the world is not so black as it has been painted in his imagination, that bread, after all, tastes sweet, that water quenches thirst, and that life is worth the living. Or put it from another point of view: what if Wordsworth the poet were partly in the wrong? The questions that had distressed him were, after all, real questions; if he was unable to solve them, he may quite well have been right in falling back upon a life of quiet enjoyment and satisfied instinct; but, none the less, the reasoning powers that he despaired of remain the sole instrument whereby man can make good his title to truth. In any case, there is no excuse for giving the importance of a discovery to the simple indulgence of feelings and meditations that are familiar to every peasant.

So might an Edinburgh Reviewer, in an unusually charitable and discerning mood, have argued with the poet. And for a full century an attitude like this, or like one of these, has been responsible for much impatience with the claims of Wordsworth's poetry. The objection, one way or the other, is ultimately the same; there is no new thing, it argues, in what he tells us; we have heard it all before; only a sophisticated mind could find a marvel in these commonplaces.

If sense-perception is the divinely appointed way to truth, it is a high-road beaten by the feet of many generations, and there needs no poet to give us the right of passage.

Wordsworth would have been the last to deny that his secret is within the reach of average humanity. Yet somehow average humanity seems to miss it. For the majority the beauties and wonders presented by the world of sense early lose their freshness, and are worn down into the soiled currency of a tediously restless intellect. Some others, who see and know, do not tell. They worship at the Temple's inner shrine, and in their familiarity with the secrets of the Holy of Holies, seem hardly aware of the existence of the Gentiles. In either case a single mode of experience, becoming the very habit of the soul, has cut off all means of expression. Now a poet is essentially an interpreter. If his conversation is uninterruptedly in heaven, he cannot speak to men. If he lives too intimately with men, learning their language and trafficking with them in their places of business, he ends by having nothing to tell them. His commission holds good only for a period, lest he fall into the dialect of Nineveh. Some accident of passion or peril startles him into utterance; his memories, brought from afar, burn within him, and by that strange light things appear for a moment

in their true likeness, as they are and always have been.

By the shock of his disappointment, and by his long immersion in the welter of vainly striving thought, Wordsworth was sent back to Nature with quickened sensibilities and new perceptions. He regained his old communion, yet it was not the same. The calm of Nature now seemed to conceal an acquaintance with grief; the memories of childhood were as if they had contained implicitly from the first all the passion of humanity. The solemnities and beauties that had surrounded him, and by the perfect composure of their silent endurance had deluded him into a belief of Arcadia, were now seen to be the pillars of a tragic theatre. And with this came the sense of consolation; for the stars and the mountains were unchanged, yet the stars and the mountains knew. The heart of the poet went out to these strong witnesses in an ecstasy of sensibility and tenderness, tremulous with the need for expression.

But for his initiation in the mystery of darkness and pain, Wordsworth's voice could never have come vibrating with the intensity that is felt in all his poems, even in those that sometimes pass for silly-sooth. His sister Dorothy was as true a lover of Nature as he, quicker in observation, and happier, perhaps, in the simplest happinesses of life. But for all that, they are deeply in error

who, on the strength of her *Journal*, find in her the makings of a better poet than her brother. She was too much a native of the golden clime to be able to describe its wonders. Indeed it may be doubted whether good women are ever sceptical enough to become great poets. The soul of them is loyalty to this life and to the race. Sanity is in their keeping, and there are questions that they dare not entertain, speculations that they cannot indulge without an acute personal sense of treason. They are poets in the sense in which Wordsworth sometimes dallied with the word; they understand, and feel, and see, but how should they make an evangel of pleasures and duties that are the simplest matters of course? It was while he kept a sense of the utter foreignness and strangeness of the most trivial human experiences that Wordsworth was a great poet.

Now once more the mere act of seeing became a sufficient instigation to poetry; and his new life brought him close to those former times when the visible world had a reality and nearness almost oppressive. As he says of his poetical counterpart, the Wanderer :—

> Deep feelings had impressed
> So vividly great objects that they lay
> Upon his mind like substances, whose presence
> Perplexed the bodily sense.

It was a kind of possession through the eye

that became the type of poetic inspiration to him, a possession nowhere better described than in the First Book of the *Excursion*, where the Wanderer sees the sun rise :—

Far and wide the clouds were touched,
And in their silent faces could he read
Unutterable love. Sound needed none,
Nor any voice of joy ; his spirit drank
The spectacle : sensation, soul, and form,
All melted into him ; they swallowed up
His animal being ; in them did he live,
And by them did he live ; they were his life.
In such access of mind, in such high hour
Of visitation from the living God,
Thought was not ; in enjoyment it expired.

And from moments of insight comparable to this, glimpses granted to high-wrought feeling, he sought light on the problems that were never again to be long out of his thought, problems concerning the constitution and capabilities of the mind of man.

It was a high piece of good fortune that sent Coleridge across his path at this very time, now when health had returned to him, when he had found his poetic method, and while every day was increasing his creative vigour. It was Coleridge who came to him, not he who went to Coleridge. The friendship began in the enthusiastic admiration whereby Coleridge stormed

his way over all barriers of reserve. We hear, it is true, of some slight tokens of reciprocity very early in the story. "Wordsworth," says Coleridge in a letter to Joseph Cottle, dated from Racedown, "admires my tragedy, which gives me great hopes." It was the least that Wordsworth could do, for very shame. Not once, but again and again, to diverse correspondents, Coleridge pours out his pæan of adoration. "Wordsworth," he says to Southey, "is a very great man, the only man to whom *at all times* and *in all modes of excellence* I feel myself inferior." And again, to Joseph Cottle, when the acquaintance had grown riper: "The Giant Wordsworth—God love him! Even when I speak in the terms of admiration due to his intellect, I fear lest those terms should keep out of sight the amiableness of his manners." Before long the ties of friendship had been fast knit, and Wordsworth had gone further out of himself to meet Coleridge than ever he went, before or after, for the sake of any other human being. Both were poets, and both were specially intent on the new sources of sensibility that were being opened to poetry in all directions. Both were philosophers, eager to do away with the artificial boundaries that divided life into compartments, and the conventions that hampered the activities of poetry. The world lay before them, a fair subject for talk, and for talk of that most stimulating kind

where a chance idea, struck out at random, may become the germ of an immortal work or the battle-cry of a victorious crusade. To men who have gauged their own powers and have felt the twitch of their tether, conversation is more of a pastime and less of a conspiracy. But youth, in the delight of its new-found liberty, feels as if it were endowed with illimitable power and the faculty of endless choice.

The temptation of such conversation proved irresistible; the Wordsworths moved from Dorsetshire to Alfoxden in Somersetshire, to be near Coleridge at Nether Stowey. For a year, from the summer of 1797 to the summer of 1798, the two poets lived in close companionship, with the happiest results for both. Wordsworth was dragged forth from his self-centred meditations and enabled to define and develop his own ideas in the give-and-take of discussion. "His genius," says Coleridge, in 1798, "is most *apparent* in poetry, and rarely, except to me in *tête-à-tête*, breaks forth in conversational eloquence." And later, in regard to the removal of the Wordsworths to the north of England, he expresses a doubt whether Wordsworth will find there "any person or persons who can feel and understand him, and reciprocate and react on him." "Dear Wordsworth," he adds, "appears to me to have hurtfully segregated and isolated his being,

Doubtless his delights are more deep and sublime, but he has likewise more hours that prey upon the flesh and blood." At Alfoxden these hours were few indeed. As if by reaction from his long strain of lonely thought, Wordsworth gave himself up to the life of a happy child; he bubbled over with glee, and babbled in unpremeditated verse. In his dedication of the *Prelude* to his friend, a dedication inspired by the memory of that happiness, he speaks truly enough of

> the buoyant spirits
> That were our daily portion when we first
> Together wantoned in wild Poesy.

Of the *Idiot Boy* he says, "This long poem was composed in the groves of Alfoxden, almost extempore, not a word, I believe, being corrected, though one stanza was omitted. I mention this in gratitude to those happy moments, for, in truth, I never wrote anything with so much glee." The garrulous and vain repetitions of this poem, as of many of his poems of this period, are not really dramatic in purpose, though, by an afterthought, a dramatic excuse was found for some of them. They are the effervescence of the wildest high spirits; the narrative, like the mother of the idiot, "cannot move for joy"; and the diction, like her son, is "idle all for very joy." The thing has some of the points of a fine poem, but

it curvets and frisks so uncontrollably that it can hardly be recognised for what it is. Yet to the end of his life Wordsworth, remembering the exuberance of his own delight in the composition of it, was unable to conceive how the *Idiot Boy* should fail to arouse the same feeling in every reader. And the zest of the lines in which he reminds Coleridge of those golden days might indeed bring the most phlegmatic of readers under the spell :—

> Thou, in bewitching words, with happy heart,
> Didst chaunt the vision of that Ancient Man,
> The bright-eyed Mariner, and rueful woes
> Didst utter of the Lady Christabel ;
> And I, associate with such labour, steeped
> In soft forgetfulness the livelong hours,
> Murmuring of him who, joyous hap, was found,
> After the perils of his moonlight ride,
> Near the loud waterfall ; or her who sate
> In misery near the miserable Thorn.

The nature and functions of poetry were the theme, as might be expected, of much of the conversation of the two friends. And here, too, the happy influences of the place and season came in aid of thought. Most of the poetry of that wonderful year was picked up out of doors. His delight, for example, in noticing the habits, tricks, and physiognomy of the asses in the woods of Alfoxden put Wordsworth upon writing *Peter Bell*.

The one red leaf, the last of its clan,
That dances as often as dance it can,
Hanging so light, and hanging so high,
On the topmost twig that looks up at the sky,

before ever it was hung over the steps of Christabel, danced in the woods of Alfoxden, and was seen by Dorothy. And the Alfoxden moon—for how much was the moon not responsible? Wordsworth's little boat, dismissed at last so contemptuously; half the magic of the *Ancient Mariner*—these and other things of no less import were born during the moonlight nights in the Quantocks. The very theory and groundwork of the *Lyrical Ballads* was suggested, it seems, by the moon. Poetry, the two poets believed, must be true to Nature; poetry, they further agreed, must give to its subject the interest of novelty by the modifying power of the imagination. Then the moon broke in. "The sudden charm," says Coleridge, "which accidents of light and shade, which moonlight or sunset, diffused over a known and familiar landscape appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. These are the poetry of Nature."

It is easy to see how, from this first conception, the scheme of the *Lyrical Ballads* grew up, and how there were included in it the two sorts of poems. The accidents of light and shade affected the two poets in different ways. To Coleridge

the rise of the moon made witchcraft credible, and gave warrant for the boldest imaginations. To Wordsworth these imaginations seemed superfluous; the moonlight was witchcraft enough; his interest and affections turned homeward to the things of every day, now seen to be susceptible of this heavenly glamour. The two sorts of poems were not both attempted by both poets. "It was agreed," says Coleridge, "that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us: an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand."

This famous and momentous agreement was, no doubt, a treaty arrived at after much discussion

and not a few differences. We have no record of the discussion, but it is plain enough that Wordsworth, though he was full of admiration for the originality of his friend's genius, yet thought his own ambition loftier and his own method more poetic. The *Ancient Mariner* was begun in collaboration, but, "as we endeavoured," says Wordsworth, "to proceed conjointly, . . . our respective manners proved so widely different that it would have been quite presumptuous in me to do anything but separate from an undertaking upon which I could only have been a clog." In a note to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* he is more plain-spoken. "The Poem of my Friend," he says, "has indeed great defects." In the meantime he had set himself, with a barely concealed competitive intent, to work out a better way. *Peter Bell*, which was finished in the summer of 1798, is Wordsworth's *Ancient Mariner*. It was composed, as he tells Southey in the Dedication, "under a belief that the Imagination not only does not require for its exercise the intervention of supernatural agency, but that, though such agency be excluded, the faculty may be called forth as imperiously and for kindred results of pleasure, by incidents, within the compass of poetic probability, in the humblest departments of daily life." It is unfortunate that we have not the original text of

Peter Bell, for when at last it was published in 1819 it had undergone repeated revisions. But even in the poem as it stands the comparison peeps out at every turn. For motto it bears this line:—"Brutus will start a Spirit as soon as Cæsar," and the contrasted methods of spirit-raising supply the matter of the Prologue:—

Long have I loved what I behold,
The night that calms, the day that cheers;
The common growth of mother-earth
Suffices me—her tears, her mirth,
Her humblest mirth and tears.

The dragon's wing, the magic ring,
I shall not covet for my dower,
If I along that lowly way
With sympathetic heart may stray,
And with a soul of power.

These given, what more need I desire
To stir, to soothe, or elevate?
What nobler marvels than the mind
May in life's daily prospect find,
May find or there create?

The protagonist of Wordsworth's tale, in place of the Mariner, is a drunken itinerant potter. He has not killed an albatross, but in the course of his reckless life he has committed a hundred more accessible crimes. At the opening of the poem he is discovered by the light of the moon cruelly beating a stray ass. The ordeal for the softer

of his heart begins. Like the Mariner, he beholds a sign in the element, and horror follows. It is not a skeleton ship, but the corpse of the ass's dead master, seen in the river. Like the Mariner, though by strictly natural means, he is cast into a trance. There are no spirits of the air to contend, one with another, over his fate, although on him too, as surely as if it had been supernaturally uttered, the verdict is given—

> The man hath penance done,
> And penance more will do.

In place of all the unearthly machinery of penance that is brought to bear on the Mariner, Wordsworth is resolved to content himself with the simplest incidents and chances of a moonlight night, as they might operate upon an excited and ignorant mind. And here he throws out a direct challenge. Although he has denied himself supernatural aid, he too has spirits within call—

> Then, coming from the wayward world,
> That powerful world in which ye dwell,
> Come, Spirits of the Mind! and try
> To-night, beneath the moonlight sky,
> What may be done with Peter Bell!

The supernatural impression is very carefully elaborated from a series of natural causes. A withered leaf scurrying along in chase of Peter fills him with alarm—

The very leaves they follow me—
So huge hath been my wickedness!

A drop of blood on a stone proves to have fallen from the wound that Peter had inflicted on the ass. The rumbling noise underground is due, though he knows it not, to the blasting operations of miners. In his excitement his eyesight plays tricks with him; by a brake of furze, under the shiver of aspen leaves, he fancies that he sees the Highland girl whom long ago he had betrayed, and hears her crying the words that she cried at the moment of her death. Then, on a heart made ready by these repeated blows, there falls the strident voice of the Methodist preacher, shouting in his wayside tabernacle—

Repent! repent! though ye have gone,
Through paths of wickedness and woe,
After the Babylonian harlot;
And, though your sins be red as scarlet,
They shall be white as snow!

The gentle moral of the *Ancient Mariner*, which comes at the end of that far flight of the imagination like the settling of a bird into the nest, has its near counterpart in the close of *Peter Bell.* We do not leave Peter until,

taught to feel
That man's heart is a holy thing,

he is overwhelmed with sorrow and pity for the

widow and children of the dead man. Even towards the ass (for Wordsworth is perfectly courageous about the ass) Peter feels the outgoings of tenderness and admiration—

> Oh! would, poor beast, that I had now
> A heart but half as good as thine!

so that, for all the differences of imagination and expression that separate the two tales, the wicked Potter is saved very much after the fashion of the Mariner, who felt a spring of love gush from his heart at the apparition of the water-snakes.

No one, not even the writer of a book in honour of Wordsworth, can afford to suggest any question as to which is the finer poem. The *Ancient Mariner* is one of the dearest possessions of English poetry. *Peter Bell* is a deeply interesting experiment. But though *Peter Bell* can never be preferred, as a whole, that does not settle out of hand the question raised by Wordsworth's hard-bitten and stubborn naturalism. It is easy to perceive that for him there was no question; he did as he felt bound to do; on this point of his convictions and practice we strike bed-rock. He gives formal expression to the law that binds him—

> Let good men feel the soul of nature,
> And see things as they are

His unflinching determination to see things as they are, without ornament and without sophistication, produced the great poems of the next few years. Had he not held to his creed jealously, almost fanatically, he might never have scaled those heights. He was saving himself and training himself, one feels, for a giant feat of strength. Apart from this personal aspect of the question, it is still open to inquiry whether the subtler methods of awakening a sense of awe and wonder are not, after all, more convincing, even as they are more difficult to handle. They are used in the *Ancient Mariner*—

> I quaked to think of my own voice
> How frightful it would be.

These two lines were omitted from the revised version of the poem—perhaps because, where they stood, they were in the nature of an anti-climax; one who is helping a corpse to hoist a sail may well be beyond the reach of these more delicate terrors. But it is exactly by these subtle thrills of supernatural effect, imparted from natural objects, that Wordsworth moves his readers. His very name for the sailor in the story of the *Waggoner* would have lent an added touch of romance even to the *Ancient Mariner*. "The old Familiar of the seas"—does he not carry an atmosphere of mystery about him? By means as slight as this

"a feeling analogous to the supernatural" is frequently excited by Wordsworth. A good example is to be found in the *White Doe of Rylstone*, where the entry of the Doe into the Abbey churchyard during service is thus described:—

The only voice which you can hear
Is the river murmuring near.
—When soft!—the dusky trees between,
And down the path through the open green,
Where is no living thing to be seen;
And through yon gateway, where is found,
Beneath the arch with ivy bound,
Free entrance to the churchyard ground—
Comes gliding in serene and slow,
Soft and silent as a dream,
A solitary Doe!
White she is as lily of June,
And beauteous as the silver moon
When out of sight the clouds are driven
And she is left alone in heaven;
Or like a ship some gentle day
In sunshine sailing far away,
A glittering ship, that hath the plain
Of ocean for her own domain.

Such a description almost prepares us to regard the Doe as

A Spirit for one day given,
A pledge of grace from purest heaven,

and illustrates its author's remark that "the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants."

This point of divergence between the two poets of the *Lyrical Ballads* has been dwelt upon because of its value in the consideration of Wordsworth's later work. For all his poetry he claims this distinction—"that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling." No doubt feelings of mystery and awe may readily be aroused by the vivid presentment of miraculous actions and situations. But so far as these feelings have any title to respect, whence do they derive it? Not from the occurrences described, if once these occurrences are shown to be incredible and impossible. They are respectable rather because the same feelings are often aroused in the mind by the strange things of the world of daily experience. "I dislike all the miraculous part of it," said Lamb of the *Ancient Mariner*, "but the feelings of the man under the operation of such scenery dragged me along like Tom Pipe's magic whistle." Wordsworth thought it a better and more legitimate aim for a poet to attempt to quicken and develop the growth of these feelings from their natural roots, which are found everywhere, than to bring them to a brief and unhealthy luxuriance by processes of artificial grafting. It is easier to see that he was not wholly successful than it is to see that he was wrong.

The question is involved with another, which

the poets, we know, often discussed, and on which each of them, when they had moved further apart, expounded his views at length. There is more of poetic conception, it will probably be admitted, in poems like *Peter Bell*, the *Idiot Boy*, and the *Thorn* than of poetic result. The expression is not equal to its task. And this opens the old debate, which raged fiercely round the earlier part of Wordsworth's poetic career,—the debate concerning the nature of Poetic Diction. An investigation of Wordsworth's theory of Poetic Diction, if it be undertaken with the desire of finding some reasonable ground or intelligible origin for the theory, will lead straight to the heart of the critical position, and will raise some fundamental questions suggested by the existence of poetry.

Before taking leave of Coleridge it will be convenient here to say a word or two more on the relations of the two poets. They came closer to each other in sympathy than great poets are usually privileged to come, even in the happiest intimacies. It is difficult therefore to assess the debts of each to the other while communism was the principle of their intellectual life. Coleridge was the apter, no doubt, to receive impressions. Whoever will read *Frost at Midnight* or *Fears in Solitude*, and compare these poems with the work their author did before he knew Wordsworth, whoever, indeed, will note the profound differences of poetic method that

divide *France, an Ode*, from the earlier *Ode on the Departing Year* will not be inclined to make light of Wordsworth's influence on his friend. Here, from *Frost at Midnight*, are the lines describing the stillness of the night in the poet's seaside cottage :—

Sea, and hill, and wood,
With all the numberless goings-on of life,
Inaudible as dreams! The thin blue flame
Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
Making it a companionable form,
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
By its own moods interprets, everywhere
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
And makes a toy of Thought.

And here are the lines at the end of the poem, wherein he promises to the infant sleeping beside him an education far different from his own :—

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple-tree, while the nigh thatch
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

Both moods, the mood of solitary brooding that concentrates all the meditative sympathies on the smallest objects, and the mood of catholic enjoyment and abandonment of the feelings to the varying tides of nature, are moods that might have been learned from Wordsworth. Coleridge is, of course, expressing his own feelings; but the influence of Wordsworth caused him to turn over afresh the material for poetry that he found in his own mind, and to seek a new value and significance in parts of it that had not heretofore held the central place in his attention.

The counter-influence is more difficult to trace, for a reason remarked by Mr. Dykes Campbell; when Wordsworth was impressed by the thought of others, the influences "permeated his whole being, and were so completely assimilated as to have become part of himself before any of their results came to the surface." The main thought of *Dejection: An Ode*, conveyed in the stanza beginning—

> O Lady! we receive but what we give,
> And in our life alone does Nature live,

whether he learned it from Coleridge or not, had a long and momentous history in Wordsworth's poetry. It is a safe conjecture that his friendship with Coleridge quickened his critical powers, and taught him to study the workings of his own

imagination in a more conscious and detached manner. It may even have encouraged him to advance as explicit doctrine what had value merely as perception, and so to make the *Lyrical Ballads* seem like a gauntlet flung in the face of public taste. But the chief benefit he received from Coleridge's friendship lay, after all, in the strength that comes from early appreciation. To be understood is a rare and great happiness; it helped Wordsworth to bear with equanimity many long years of public indifference and ridicule.

CHAPTER III

POETIC DICTION

When the *Lyrical Ballads* were first published the larger and more difficult questions concerning the nature and methods of the poetic imagination were not mentioned in the Preface. Only one question is there conspicuous, a question of diction. "The majority of the following poems," says the Preface, "are to be considered as experiments. They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure."

A poet should think twice and thrice before he writes a preface to his own work. By writing these two short sentences Wordsworth secured for certain years an almost complete neglect of many novel aspects of his poetic manner, and ranged against him, as opponents of his poetry, all who disagreed with his theory. He involved himself also (and this was no unmixed misfortune) in a

more elaborate exposition and defence of that theory. In the long preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* he puts the issue on broader grounds, and, in wonderfully condensed language, explains his own view of the principles of Poetry. The most important paragraph of this famous apology must be quoted at length :—

The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them throughout, as far as this was possible, in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of the imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect ; and further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature, chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Humble and rustic life was generally chosen because in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language ; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated ; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable ; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorpor-

ated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The language, too, of these men has been adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions.

To this comprehensive statement of his intent Wordsworth adds a demonstration that some of the most interesting parts of good poems will be found to be written in what is strictly the language of prose. Emboldened by his own argument, he proceeds to a wider generalisation: "It may be safely affirmed that there neither is, nor can be, any *essential* difference between the language of prose and metrical composition." And in a note on "what is usually called Poetic Diction" he gives a yet more marked prominence to what, on his own showing, was not the most important or significant part of his original statement.

In the admirable chapters of the *Biographia Literaria* that deal with Wordsworth's theory, some of these contentions are answered once and for all by Coleridge, and a much deeper and more philosophic conception of language than was ever attained by Wordsworth is set forth in reply.

With the license of a friend, Coleridge, having disposed of the arguments advanced in support of the theory, attempts a sympathetic elucidation of "the real object, which, it is probable, Mr. Wordsworth had before him in his critical preface," and finds it in that style of poetry—the "neutral style" he calls it—where everything is expressed just as one would wish to talk, and yet all dignified, attractive, and interesting. But it is not in this style of poetry, he adds, that Wordsworth has achieved his highest excellence. "Were there excluded from Mr. Wordsworth's poetic compositions all that a literal adherence to the theory of his preface would exclude, two-thirds at least of the marked beauties of his poetry must be erased."

The question is worth handling again, if only for the sake of the remaining third. Once more, what was the real object which Wordsworth had before him in his critical preface? Did he mean simply to profess his adherence to the purest doctrine of the classical school of poets in England and France? It was that school which brought the natural, easy style in verse to its highest perfection. The campaign against long words, Latinisms, provincialisms, poetic fictions, bombast, and idle ornament was opened by the fathers of all the Academies. Malherbe was not a Lake Poet, and it was Malherbe who took as his

masters in language the day-labourers of Paris, and struck out of his compositions any word or figure of speech that was not readily intelligible to them. It was Ben Jonson, the forerunner and teacher of the English classical school, who wrote lines like these, wherein the language used differs in no respect from the language of prose composition:—

> Drink to me only with thine eyes,
> And I will pledge with mine;
> Or leave a kiss within the cup,
> And I'll not ask for wine.

It was Pope who assured his friend that plain truth needs no flowers of speech. Was Wordsworth a belated, unwitting follower of Malherbe and Jonson and Pope? If he is not ranked among their disciples, is it chiefly because the exuberance of his imagination continually breaks out in a loftier vein of romantic hyperbole and a greater audacity of poetic expression?

The practice of Wordsworth, it is agreed by all, is not conformable to the principles that he lays down in his prose prefaces. But the deviations from the theory that have attracted most attention are those which occur in some of his finest poems. When he writes well, it has been argued, he breaks his own rules; and when he writes ill, it has been implied, he keeps them. But the fact is that he hardly ever observes his own rules, and the poems

in which he most nearly observes them are often among his best.

In the simpler numbers of the *Lyrical Ballads* he offends consistently and continually against prose standards of speech. The prose choice of words is, in the main, observed. But the prose order is broken, not for the sake of emphasis or melody, but from the constraint imposed by metre and rhyme. Now, for the preservation of that simplicity and sincerity which he valued so highly, the prose order of words is much more important than the prose choice of words. A phrase that lives in common speech becomes absurd when its component parts are tumbled and disarranged; and this absurdity, which could easily be avoided by any master of metre, is largely responsible for the distresses felt by the reader of the *Lyrical Ballads*. Simon Lee was an old huntsman, and his age is thus described :—

> Of years he has upon his back,
> No doubt, a burthen weighty.

And again—

> Few months of life has he in store
> As he to you will tell.

The effect that Wordsworth seeks is the plain colloquial directness of such a sentence as this, spoken in explanation of Simon Lee's shrunken stature—"He has a heavy burden of years upon

his back, no doubt." But first "weighty" is needed for the rhyme, and then every word in the sentence must take up a forced artificial posture for the rhythm. So in the *Last of the Flock* occur these lines :—

And crazily, and wearily,
I went my work about.

And in the *Thorn* these :—

You must take care and chuse your time
The mountain when to cross.

In his prose apologies Wordsworth habitually speaks of metre as a charm "superadded" to the other beauties of poetry. In many parts of the *Lyrical Ballads* it is an extravagantly costly superaddition.

The "neutral style" in poetry (to preserve Coleridge's name for the well-bred easy manner of many poets of the Seventeenth Century) depends for its success on a delicate observance of natural idiom and natural cadence. If these be respected, an unusual word or two will not appreciably alter the general impression. The poets who most excel in this style ordered their practice by social standards and usages. But these standards counted for little with Wordsworth, who held aloof from society, even among the dalesmen of the Lakes. The impression that his way of life made upon his neighbours is vividly recorded in Canon

Rawnsley's delightful *Reminiscences.* "Many's the time," said an old inn-keeper, "I've seed him a takin' his family out in a string, and niver geein' the deariest bit of notice to 'em; standin' by hissel' and stoppin' behind agapin,' wi' his jaws workin' the whoal time; but niver no crackin' wi' 'em, nor no pleasure in 'em,—a desolate-minded man, ye kna. . . . It was potry as did it." If, therefore, Wordsworth proposed to acquire for himself the fluent colloquial graces of poets who lived much in the company of their fellows, he chose a mode of life which put success in that attempt almost beyond his reach.

In truth it is the merest coincidence that brings him into line with "the mob of gentlemen who wrote with ease." He valued colloquial forms and phrases not as the chosen vehicle of sound sense and habitual feeling, but as the most sincere expression of deep and rare passions. His model is not to be found in the pleasant ease of Waller or Cotton, but in the bare intolerable force of such a speech as this of King Lear—

> Do not laugh at me,
> For as I am a man, I think this lady
> To be my child Cordelia.

And he sought the occasion for these passions less in crises of great events than among the humblest incidents and situations of common life

By intense concentration of the sympathies and imaginative powers on any single object of perception or thought he produced in himself vague and deep emotions which, it seemed, could best be perpetuated and imparted by the simplest form of words that might serve to recall the original suggestion.

This entirely mystical conception of the functions of poetry led him into various faults of expression. Sometimes his own conceptions take so complete a possession of his mind, that he forgets to give help to the reader, and presents him merely with the naked unaccommodated object which has been the source of his own wonder and delight. There is a passage in his essay upon Epitaphs, contributed to the *Friend*, which might serve as commentary on some of his poems. "In an obscure corner of a country churchyard," he says, "I once espied, half overgrown with hemlock and nettles, a very small stone laid upon the ground, bearing nothing more than the name of the deceased, with the date of birth and death, importing that it was an infant which had been born one day and died the following. I know not how far the Reader may be in sympathy with me, but more awful thoughts of rights conferred, of hopes awakened, of remembrances stealing away or vanishing were imparted to my mind by that inscription there before my

eyes than by any other that it has ever been my lot to meet with upon a tombstone." The bare fact—there, according to Wordsworth, is poetry in essence. What that can be added by way of reflection or exhortation is not poor and partial compared with the writing on the stone? In this case the reader may fairly be trusted to share those impulses of deeper birth that come from the simple record. But in other cases the reader is left without a clue; he is caught and misled by some common association of words or ideas; he is looking, perhaps, for argument or narrative, neither of which he is likely to find, and he feels irritation or contempt when he sees the poet excited by a music inaudible to other ears. Wordsworth's poetic career was one long campaign against the dominion of vulgar associations; but he sometimes underestimated their strength. "My language," he confesses, "may frequently have suffered from those arbitrary connections of feelings and ideas with particular words and phrases from which no man can altogether protect himself." In a letter to Professor Wilson he deals with the objections made to the *Idiot Boy*. "I have often applied to idiots," he remarks, "in my own mind, that sublime expression of Scripture that '*their life is hidden with God*.' . . . It is probable that the principal cause of your dislike to this particular poem lies in the *word* Idiot. If there had been

any such word in our language *to which we had attached passion*, as lack-wit, half-wit, witless, etc., I should have certainly employed it in preference; but there is no such word." The poet, it is to be noted, attached passion to the very name "Idiot"; he found the pure elements of the poetic temper in that trance of pleasure which kept the boy a whole night long wandering in the moonlight and listening to the hootings of the owls. "When we see the idiot in his glory," said Byron, "we think the Bard the hero of the story." He was right; Wordsworth is completely at one with the hero of the story, whereas Susan Gale and the doctor are the merest lay-figures. One of the verses of *A Poet's Epitaph* might serve to describe either the idiot or the poet who celebrated his adventures—

> But he is weak; both Man and Boy
> Hath been an idler in the land;
> Contented if he might enjoy
> The things which others understand.

Nevertheless, the word "Idiot" does its old accustomed work; the very mention of it, like the raising of a latch, lets loose all the small, watchful, competitive instincts of the human breast; against the will of the poet the race is run; the Idiot is defeated, and the sudden glory of superiority that flushes through the victorious reader explodes in pleasant laughter.

The poor ass of *Peter Bell* is in almost as bad a case. Wordsworth found something weird and solemn in the patience and immobility of the ass—even to the slow movements of its long left ear. The steadfast suffering of a creature which when cruelly beaten will neither yield, nor retaliate, nor complain impressed him with something of tragic dignity, and he exhibits its moving power in the panic of hatred and superstitious terror that it inspires in Peter. He might have spared his pains, for the ass is a dull beast, duller than most men; the opportunity is not to be lost, and the intellectual rivalry begins again, with another victory for the clever reader.

This is a question not so much of poetic diction as of poetic imagination. A mind may so confirm itself, by natural predilection and long habit, in all tricky and fortuitous associations of ideas as to cut itself off from fresh sources of imaginative suggestion. The arbitrary links between ideas are multiplied and strengthened by conversation in society, which exacts ready-made judgments and encourages brisk conceits. For the solitary poet in contemplation they have no value, or rather, they are hindrances and misdirections. They are as plentiful as weeds; they make the stock-in-trade of a pert, barren man; and even good wits are troubled by them. A recent critic of Matthew Arnold finds the title "Mixed Essays" an unhappy

title, because, he says, it suggests biscuits. These bad habits of the mind are not easily conquered, and they are the despair of poets. Wordsworth, who, more than other poets, was careful for the chastity of the imagination, asks his readers to try to conquer them, to endeavour to look steadily at the subject, as he has looked at it. Being himself little versed in the small traffic of social intercourse and the paltry entanglements of commonplace association, he was surprised and puzzled to find that by merely naming the subject of his contemplation he had raised a horde of false issues. Both his friends and the critics, who were not his friends, were against him. His confidence in himself wavered, and he did what originally he had refused to do—he made alterations in his text on the advice of others, though his understanding was not convinced. Some of these alterations have happily disappeared from the definitive edition; others remain. Thus the poem on *Gipsies* originally ended with these two lines—

> The silent Heavens have goings-on;
> The stars have tasks—but these have none.

To some mind or other the word "goings-on" suggested flippant associations, and the lines were altered thus—

> Life which the very stars reprove
> As on their silent tasks they move!

Not only is the most telling word suppressed; there is a more fundamental change, typical of many changes made by Wordsworth when he had lost touch with his original impressions. The bare contrast of the earlier poem is moralised. The strangeness of the simple impression is lost for the sake of a most impotent didactic application. The poet, after a day of crowded and changeful experience under the open sky, returns to find the group of gypsies sitting as before round their camp-fire. The winds are blowing and the clouds moving, so that the little knot of human beings seems the only stationary thing in nature. The restless joy of the poet, his fellow-feeling with the mighty activities of Nature, breaks out in a single remonstrance—

> Oh better wrong and strife,
> Better vain deeds and evil than such life!

Even this he changed when his sensibilities had been crusted over and his appetite for explicit moral teaching increased by the passage of years. In the edition of 1820 these lines read—

> Oh better wrong and strife
> (By nature transient) than such torpid life!

The change introduces an argument—and a bad argument. Evil-doing is preferred to torpor because it is less permanent in its nature and effects—a statement which might very readily be

challenged. The whole passage illustrates, as well as another, the difficulties that confronted Wordsworth in the attempt to mend his own work. He lost sympathy in his later life with his earlier mystical intuitions. He desired, in his decline, to give the age the moral lessons that it asked. And the maxims of practical morality, if they are to be warranted, not by the moral sense of the community, but by the sudden impulses of imagination that come to a poet as he gazes on the open sky, are driven to seek help from fantastic arguments.

The famous case of the *Blind Highland Boy* shows Wordsworth once more troubled and puzzled by the advice of his friends, and attempting to remedy a misunderstanding of the workings of his imagination by a change in his machinery and diction. The blind boy, it is well known, put forth on Loch Leven in the first craft he could find—

A Household Tub, like one of those
Which women use to wash their clothes,
This carried the blind Boy.

The enormity of the rhyme justified protest. And then came Coleridge with his green turtle-shell, recommended as a substitute for the washing-tub on the ground of its "romantic uncommonness." Coleridge himself would, no doubt, as he said, have used the turtle-shell. Before he had done

with it he would probably have launched it on Alph, the sacred river, for a voyage of strange adventure. The tub, which was good enough for the blind boy, was good enough for Wordsworth. But he listened and yielded, and, at the expense of nine laborious stanzas, he got the shell into Scotland, and put it within reach of his hero. Meantime the movement of the poem is retarded, and the careless triumph of the child is less convincing from the forethought necessary for the carrying out of his scheme to navigate the shell. We may be thankful that a regard for the dictates of prudential morality did not cause the poet to omit this other stanza from his later editions—

> And let him, let him go his way,
> Alone, and innocent, and gay!
> For, if good Angels love to wait
> On the forlorn unfortunate,
> This Child will take no harm.

If the aged poet's attention had been called to the possible influence of this verse as an exhortation to culpable negligence, there is far too much reason to think that he would have tinkered it or suppressed it.

All these much-discussed audacities of the work of his prime—these "tubs" and "goings-on"—are not, therefore, to be treated as faults of diction. They are of a piece with the simple and fervid quality of his mind. His error, if error it be, lies

in the little care he takes to put the reader at his own point of view. He asks to be heard as if his were the first descriptions of a new-found world. An ordinary reader must have fair warning if he is to divest himself of all literary predispositions, put his books behind him, and begin again from the beginning. Nevertheless, for Wordsworth's purpose, and in relation to his chosen subjects, the diction that he used was the best diction; indeed, in many cases, the only diction possible.

Faults of diction he has, but they are not these. While passion holds him, while he is moved or exalted, his language keeps its naked intensity. But when his own feeling flags and there is ground to be covered he is a bad traveller on the flat. The plain words of common life no longer satisfy him, for the glow has gone out of them. Sometimes he makes what he can of them; and there are no more prosy passages in English verse than some of those where Wordsworth has an explanation to interpolate, a mechanical junction to effect, or a narrative to carry on to the next place where reflection may rest and brood. In these passages, while he is simple, he is often feeble and talkative. But sometimes, on the other hand, the lack of vitality consciously oppresses him, and he endeavours to make it good by forced decoration and fancy. At such times he produces samples of false poetic diction as vapid as any

invented by the rhymesters of the Eighteenth Century. Of mere flatness, as might be expected, there are many examples in the *Prelude*, and more in the *Excursion*. Lines like these are all too common—

Nor less do I remember to have felt,
Distinctly manifested at this time,
A human-heartedness about my love
For objects hitherto the absolute wealth
Of my own private being and no more.

In some of the shorter poems, where there is a piece of commonplace information to be conveyed —say a postal address, "The Pantheon, Oxford Street"—it is often conveyed after this fashion :—

Near the stately Pantheon you'll meet with the same,
In the street that from Oxford hath borrowed its name.

The false poetic diction that he condemned is easy to example from his own work. Here is the beginning of his poem on *Water-fowl* :—

Mark how the feathered tenants of the flood,
With grace of motion that might scarcely seem
Inferior to angelical, prolong
Their curious pastime!

And here, from the *Prelude*, is a record of the fact that he first entered London on a stage-coach :—

On the roof
Of an itinerant vehicle I sate,
With vulgar men about me.

Or a better instance, too long to quote, may be found in the First Book of the *Prelude*, where every device of fanciful elaboration is bestowed on the description of the soiled and imperfect packs of cards which helped to pass away the long winter evenings of his boyhood in the Lakes.

Wherever deep emotion fails him, these ornamental excrescences are liable to occur. And therefore they occur least frequently in the poems written during the years immediately following his return to poetry. During those years his most casual feelings, aroused by trivial events, had a strength and vivacity that made all adornment a profanation, and his resolve to be quit of all deceits and sentimentalities was then an instrumental part of his religion. Wordsworth's style at its best has many virtues; but one virtue, all his own, is greater than the rest. He can, and often does, write like other poets, in a manner that, without a trace of imitation, gives a familiar pleasure to a trained literary sense. The best passages so written have been perhaps more praised than any other parts of his work; but they are not Wordsworth's best. His description of skating in the *Prelude* is a wonderful piece of verbal melody:—

> So through the darkness and the cold we flew,
> And not a voice was idle; with the din
> Smitten, the precipices rang aloud;

The leafless trees and every icy crag
Tinkled like iron; while far distant hills
Into the tumult sent an alien sound
Of melancholy not unnoticed, while the stars
Eastward were sparkling clear, and in the west
The orange sky of evening died away.

And his own genius, his own love for the far spaces, makes itself felt in that "alien sound of melancholy." He can write magnificently, again, in a style which, from the time of Shakespeare onward, has been one of the great faculties of English literature, the style of the metaphysical imagination. So, in the *Excursion*, the Solitary describes his agony of thought:—

Then my soul
Turned inward,—to examine of what stuff
Time's fetters are composed; and life was put
To inquisition long and profitless!
By pain of heart—now checked—and now impelled—
The intellectual power, through words and things,
Went sounding on, a dim and perilous way!

And here, to quote one more passage that reconciles all tastes, are the sombre imaginings suggested to him by the four yew-trees of Borrowdale:—

Beneath whose sable roof
Of boughs, as if for festal purpose, decked
With unrejoicing berries—ghostly Shapes
May meet at noontide; Fear and trembling Hope,
Silence and Foresight; Death the Skeleton

And Time the Shadow ;—there to celebrate,
As in a natural temple scattered o'er
With altars undisturbed of mossy stone,
United worship ; or in mute repose
To lie, and listen to the mountain flood
Murmuring from Glaramara's inmost caves.

Had Wordsworth always written thus, he would have escaped all blame. Here is "a certain colouring of the imagination" thrown over ordinary things, whereby they are "presented to the mind in an unusual aspect," and no question of poetic diction is raised. Yet he was bound to raise the question and to make attempts in a style unlike this œcumenical style of poetry; for his views concerning poetic diction followed inevitably from his beliefs concerning the highest functions of poetry.

The poet is, first of all, a seer. He is a man, speaking to men; but he sees more truly, and consequently feels more deeply, than they; and his business is to teach them to see and feel. He can easily engage their attention by presenting them with abnormal, rare, or strange objects. So poetry becomes a pastime, a delight apart from the interests of common life. Or, by the power of language, he can call forth in full flood those feelings that blur vision, those merciful and tender suffusions that soften the hard outlines of fact and bring relief to the weaker sense. But

neither is this, according to Wordsworth, the right work of poetry. To feel deeply and sanely and wisely in the presence of things seen is what he teaches; but first, to see them. He had found deliverance for himself by opening his eyes on the world after a nightmare of dark, confused mental agitation, and he believed in truth as few men believe in it. His determination to look steadily on life made him intolerant of the myriad delusions, "*as thick as motes that people the sunbeam*," *which intercept the eye and focus* it on some nearer object than the face of truth. He does injustice to himself by describing the poet as one who throws "a certain colouring of the imagination" over common incidents and situations. The working of his own imagination, so long as it remained pure and strong, is ill compared to painting or to any light but the whitest. In his *Elegiac Stanzas* on the death of his brother, who was drowned at sea, he expounds his creed more justly. He is looking at a picture of Peele Castle in a storm, and remembering how, many years before, he had lived in its neighbourhood for a whole summer month and had never seen the glassy calm of the sea broken:—

> Ah! THEN, if mine had been the Painter's hand,
> To express what then I saw; and add the gleam,
> The light that never was, on sea or land,
> The consecration, and the Poet's dream;

I would have planted thee, thou hoary Pile,
Amid a world how different from this!
Beside a sea that could not cease to smile;
On tranquil land, beneath a sky of bliss.

These lines, or some of them, have been so frequently quoted apart from their context, that it has become almost a hopeless task to get them understood. The misunderstanding must have come to Wordsworth's notice, for in the edition of 1820 he altered the first stanza thus:—

Ah! THEN, if mine had been the Painter's hand,
To express what then I saw, and add a gleam
Of lustre, known to neither sea nor land,
But borrowed from the youthful Poet's dream.

This later version removes all misunderstanding. But the poet's readers, intelligibly enough, preferred the earlier version; preferred, indeed, to keep their two lines in an inverted sense, and to misread or neglect the rest of the poem. It is the word "consecration," used, as it would seem, for a dream-like glory, a peace attained by shunning reality, which is chiefly responsible for the misreading. Yet the original version, which is also the final version, may be kept without danger of mistake, if only the poem be read as a whole. The following verses make all clear:—

Such, in the fond illusion of my heart,
Such Picture would I at that time have made:

And seen the soul of truth in every part,
A stedfast peace that might not be betrayed.

So once it would have been,—'tis so no more;
I have submitted to a new control:
A power is gone, which nothing can restore;
A deep distress hath humanised my Soul.

. . . .

Farewell, farewell the heart that lives alone,
Housed in a dream, at distance from the Kind!
Such happiness, wherever it be known,
Is to be pitied; for 'tis surely blind.

But welcome fortitude, and patient cheer,
And frequent sights of what is to be borne!
Such sights, or worse, as are before me here.—
Not without hope we suffer and we mourn.

The happiness that is to be pitied is blind happiness, which nourishes itself on its own false fancies. The happiness that is to be coveted is the happiness of fearless vision, "and frequent sights of what is to be borne." And it is by the daylight of truth, not by "the light that never was, on sea or land," that the poet desires to look upon the things of earth. He is strong enough to bear it, and can face a life-long grief without flinching:—

This, which I know, I speak with mind serene.

The greatness of Wordsworth's best work derives from this calm and almost terrible strength.

It asks strength to be a seer. To accept all truth of experience, yet to cherish rather than try to deaden the human feelings that attend on the knowledge of such truth—to believe in them, too—is a feat not to be compassed save by the highest courage and the profoundest humility. It was a new courage and a new humility that Wordsworth introduced into the poetic treatment of Nature and of Man. And it was also a new joy; for just because he has dared to the uttermost, and in his heart asks for nothing but what he is to have, his joy in the pleasures that come his way is pure and gay and whole-hearted, without a drop of bitterness in it. He has put some of his own experience into the story of *Ruth*:—

> The engines of her pain, the tools
> That shaped her sorrow, rocks and pools,
> And airs that gently stir
> The vernal leaves—she loved them still;
> Nor ever taxed them with the ill
> Which had been done to her.

Wordsworth attained to the simple pleasures and the calm resignation of the poor mad girl with his eyes open and his reason unclouded.

These qualities manifest themselves in his greatest poems, and—to return to the immediate subject—they give its inspired simplicity to his style. His strength makes no demonstration; his reserve is so complete as to be almost inex-

pressive. There is an indissoluble self-possession, as of the mountains, in the poems of his prime. The four or five poems written in Germany on the unknown Lucy show this quality at its highest. He can say all that he has to say in the form of a brief record of facts. So in the address to England:—

Among thy mountains did I feel
  The joy of my desire;
And she I cherished turned her wheel
  Beside an English fire.

Thy mornings showed, thy nights concealed
  The bowers where Lucy played;
And thine too is the last green field
  That Lucy's eyes surveyed.

So in the even greater poem, almost superhuman in its power of control, where each of the short sentences is half a tragedy:—

A slumber did my spirit seal;
  I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
  The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
  She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course
  With rocks, and stones, and trees.

It is impossible to speak of the style of such a poem as this; for a style is something habitual,

and here is a unique feat of strength, the achievement of a lifetime. Yet Wordsworth, if he never equalled it again, came near it so often that he has almost earned the right to a definition of his style as a continuous fabric of great imaginative moments. Many suitors of the Muse have tried to draw his bow since the strength and cunning of his own hand failed, and none of them is strong enough. *Dora*, and *Aylmer's Field*, and *Enoch Arden* are moving poems, but they belong to a tamer world, and do not come near to the elemental pathos of the story of Michael and the sheep-fold, or of that other story, which has nothing but the passage of years for its incidents, of Margaret in the wayside cottage. It is wrong, indeed, to call these two works stories; they are the very stuff of first-hand experience, and their reader lives through many more hours than they take in the telling. Tennyson is a story-teller; his directing will makes itself felt throughout; he presides over the destinies of his characters, and imposes his judgments on them and on the reader. When he has brought Enoch Arden to the last harbour he cannot refrain from comment:—

> So past the strong heroic soul away.
> And when they buried him the little port
> Had seldom seen a costlier funeral.

But Wordsworth is satisfied with the solemnity and weight of the mere event:—

She is dead,
The light extinguished of her lonely hut,
The hut itself abandoned to decay,
And she forgotten in the quiet grave.

He shuns all dramatic developments that are not inherent in the event itself. When the old man lost his only son,

Among the rocks
He went, and still looked up to sun and cloud,
And listened to the wind ; and, as before,
Performed all kinds of labour for his sheep,
And for the land, his small inheritance.

And the consolation sought is sought in no special or personal alleviations, but in the processes of eternal Law :—

There is a comfort in the strength of love ;
'Twill make a thing endurable, which else
Would overset the brain, or break the heart.

There is a comfort also, slow and dearly purchased, in

the calm oblivious tendencies
Of Nature, 'mid her plants, and weeds, and flowers,
And silent overgrowings,

whereby she reclaims humanity from its restless dream and blends it with herself.

A comparison of Wordsworth's greater poems with those which Tennyson wrote under his immediate influence must not be used to depreciate the younger poet. Tennyson was con-

happy in yielding too easily to that overmastering influence. His right masters were Coleridge and Keats, and his best work does not disgrace them. So that if *Enoch Arden* be set for a moment beside *Michael* or the tale of Margaret, it is only for the sake of just proportion, as a man of ordinary stature may be introduced into a picture to give some idea of the sheer height of the cliffs that tower above him.

There are few, even of Wordsworth's poems, that maintain themselves throughout at the elevation of these two. But everywhere, when his deepest and sincerest feelings are touched, his language answers to them, and becomes simpler, more matter-of-fact, a bare transcript of experience, without commentary. It may be in a description of Peter Bell's journeys on foot

> through Yorkshire dales,
> Among the rocks and winding *scars;*
> Where deep and low the hamlets lie
> Beneath their little patch of sky
> And little lot of stars.

Or it may be in a *Complaint*, "suggested by a change in the manner of a friend":—

> There is a change—and I am poor;
> Your love hath been, not long ago,
> A fountain at my fond heart's door,
> Whose only business was to flow;
> And flow it did: not taking heed
> Of its own bounty, or my need.

Where the feeling deepens he avoids even simple metaphors like this, that he may bring his words as close as possible to the actual experience.

And now the vexed question of diction may be taken up once more, with better hope. Wordsworth's devotion to the mere fact, his fixed and jealous gaze on truth, brought him into difficulties and dangers unlike those which beset poets who indulge the imagination with a freer course. The mere fact said everything to him; the dates on a tombstone spoke eloquently; and a parish register, without addition, touched the spring of sympathy and tears. But the mere fact, which says everything, comes perilously near also to saying nothing. A parish register is not in itself a poem; and the poet who aims at a similar economy of matter, while he avoids all the flowery enticements that allure weaker feet, is likely enough to fall out of poetry on the other side. There is scant foothold for him in these bare places. He must plant his steps, one by one, with unremitting skill and care; a single error of judgment will precipitate him into bathos. And here Wordsworth found that language, the instrument of poetry, which had played other poets false, was not true to him; that words were deceitful, clumsy, unmanageable, and tricky. He speaks, in his theoretical prefaces, of the

misuse of language, of distorted expressions and adulterated phraseology, as if to get rid of these things once for all required only an act of common honesty; as if the disease were of a recent and easily assignable origin, and could be stamped out by the self-denial of poets. He was to find out later that his quarrel with the corruptions of language was a quarrel with language itself, and that when men do not speak the truth it is as often because they cannot as because they will not. The thing to be expressed, even at its simplest, is far beyond the limited compass of the instrument, and, save by partial indications, can no more be interpreted in words than a symphony can be rendered upon the flute. A confession of the inadequacy of language for the communication of the poet's thoughts and feelings interrupts the *Prelude* and the *Excursion* again and again. The "heroic argument" of the might of souls, and of their inner workings while yet they are new to the world, is propounded in the Third Book of the *Prelude*, but is soon set aside, for

> in the main
> It lies far hidden from the reach of words.

The men who are best framed for contemplation, whose life is nourished on the feelings that are also the life of poetry, are often mute and incapable of imparting their experience :—

Theirs is the language of the heavens, the power,
The thought, the image, and the silent joy:
Words are but under-agents in their souls;
When they are grasping with their greatest strength,
They do not breathe among them.

And the wonders of mountain and lake defy the powers of the most accomplished speech :—

Such beauty, varying in the light
Of living nature, cannot be portrayed
By words, nor by the pencil's silent skill;
But is the property of him alone
Who hath beheld it, noted it with care,
And in his mind recorded it with love!

Man, therefore, cannot speak the truth, which is beyond him and above him. When he attempts it he must needs use the words that have been put into his mouth by others, and use them very much as he has been taught to use them. And words were not invented at first, and are very imperfectly adapted at best, for the severer purposes of truth. They bear upon them all the weaknesses of their origin, and all the maims inflicted by the prejudices and fanaticisms of generations of their employers. They perpetuate the memory or prolong the life of many noble forms of human extravagance, and they are the monuments of many splendid virtues. But with all their abilities and dignities they are seldom well fitted for the quiet and accurate statement of the thing that is. In short, they are

necessary instruments of Rhetoric, and are thereby often spoilt for the rarer and purer service of Poetry.

The difficulties of truth-telling have been noticed by the poets, but the chief cause of those difficulties, so far as they are superable, has received less attention; and it stands in the closest relation to the present problem. Browning has put a part of the case admirably:—

> When man walks the garden of this world
> For his own solace, and unchecked by law,
> Speaks or keeps silence as himself sees fit,
> Without the least incumbency to lie,
> Why, can he tell you what a rose is like,
> Or how the birds fly, and not slip to false
> Though truth serve better?

But truth does not always serve better, and the man who is sincerely attempting to tell you what a rose is like is engaged in a very unusual kind of intellectual exercise. Words are shaped for warfare; they have acquired their uses in that never-ending struggle for pre-eminence and power which is called society. The struggle itself Wordsworth recognised, and he knew how inconsistent it is with the disinterested vision of poetry. "There neither is," he writes to Lady Beaumont, "nor can be, any genuine enjoyment of poetry among nineteen out of twenty of those persons who live, or wish to live, in the broad light of the

world—among those who either are, or are striving to make themselves, people of consideration in society. This is a truth, and an awful one, because to be incapable of a feeling for poetry, in my sense of the word, is to be without love of human nature and reverence for God." But here, again, he is perhaps hardly conscious of the scope of his indictment; those interferences with poetry of which he complains are caused not by the vices of a class, but by the habits of the human race, imposed on them by the necessities of life. Wherever there is human society there is war; and if Wordsworth had been intimate with the dalesmen whom he contemplated from on high, he would have found it in the Lakes. Beasts fight with horns, and men, when the guns are silent, with words. The changes of meaning in words, from good to bad and from bad to good senses, are incidents in the campaign, the capture and recapture of weapons. The very existence of these good and bad senses, which are quite independent of the root meaning, is proof enough, without detailed illustration, of the incessant nature of the strife. The question is not what a word means, but what it imputes. The combatants are always manœuvring for the possession of the higher ground, which is claimed and reclaimed by successive adaptations of language to the needs of the case. Grown men and women

who live in the world do very little thinking with words apart from these military operations. If language serves their turn they are content; its fitness for the representation of absolute truth, of fact or impression, is no part of their daily care.

What is a poet or a philosopher to do who tries to carry on his work in the midst of this mellay? He finds no instruments ready to his hand and fitted for his peaceful investigations. Even those which seem likeliest, the simple names of things and qualities, have had an edge and a point put on them by some industrious warrior. "The word *material*," said a great critic of this generation, "should never be used but with the highest respect." It has shared the fortunes of many other words deserving of reverence, and has been degraded by controversy to a term of opprobrium. The stuff of which the world is made, in all its variety and marvel, may stir thought in the artist or poet; the fighter needs it only as a vantage-ground whence he may assert his own superiority or make good his own contentions.

Wordsworth, though to see things as they are was his dearest aim, knew that man is a creature too perturbed to see all things clearly. "Angels," he says in the *Excursion*,

perceive
With undistempered and unclouded spirit
The object as it is; but, for ourselves,

> That speculative height we may not reach.
> The good and evil are our own; and we
> Are that which we would contemplate from far.

He found also that these perturbations interfere with the communication and reception of such truth as may be discerned. This caused him to attempt the purification of language. He desired to purge it of its rhetorical elements, and even of its logical elements, in so far as the operations of logic impede the breadth and unity of vision. He distrusted

> that false secondary power
> By which we multiply distinctions, then
> Deem that our puny boundaries are things
> That we perceive, and not that we have made.

But language is a social product, and cannot be purer in the lump than the society that shapes it and uses it. Wordsworth turned naturally, therefore, to the purest society known to him—to the simple people of the Lakes. Surely these people, who passed their life in the presence of the great things of Nature,

> in lights and shades
> That marched and countermarched about the hills
> In glorious apparition,

would furnish him with a speech which might express something of the glory that he saw.

His reason for choosing humble and rustic life as his academy of language was thus, like the rest

of his theory of poetry, purely mystical. He knew no dialect, and did not trouble himself to acquire one. His strongest motive appears clearly in the short sentence where he says that in a humble condition of life "men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived." Coleridge made short work of this philological theory. But its interest remains; for it shows that the best part of language, to Wordsworth's mind, was to be found in the mere names of natural objects. Could not the men who had these names daily on their lips give him some help in the effort to penetrate the mystery and to enter into a closer communion?

Another society, which uses a language greater, more passionate, and purer than the language of the shepherds of the Lakes, was, in his theory at least, overlooked by Wordsworth—the society of poets, living and dead. It is they who preserve language from pollution and enrich it with new powers. They redeem words from degradation by a single noble employment. They establish a tradition that bridges over the treacherous currents and quicksands of time and fashion. And they were Wordsworth's masters, though he pays them scant acknowledgment. It was an acute criticism of Coleridge's, passed on Wordsworth's description of his own language as "a selection of the language really used by men," that the very power

of making a selection implies the previous possession of the language selected. The dalesmen brought their humble speeches to the poet, who accepted or rejected them, sitting himself as judge, with Shakespeare, Milton, and Spenser as assessors. This procedure, though not consistently observed, was good enough; it renewed the warrant of experience for phrases which without that warrant might have sounded distant and languid. The experience, like all vivid experiences, seemed so unprecedented that it imparted a strange air to the words that set it forth, and Wordsworth was apt at times to forget that the language he spoke and wrote was indeed the English language, and that his handling of it, when he put forth all his strength, was guided by the same principles and the same tact that gave Chaucer a place among the masters

CHAPTER IV

NATURE

WHAT then is the work of Poetry—the work for which words, the poet's instruments, seemed all too feeble? Man, in his passage through this world, is the plaything of great forces. Some startle his soul into passionate feeling, some lull it in Elysian pleasure, some tease it into fret and futility. Yet through all its adventures the soul is conscious that it is something other than a helpless pawn, that the forces which assail it draw some of their reality from its own creative energy, that the spectacle which it looks out upon is partly of its own arranging. Wordsworth wished to reproduce and communicate the highest raptures and the most exalted moods that result from this twofold agency—to show how the mind of man is affected by the external world, and in its turn reacts upon it, and how the heart of man may be so disposed as to be lifted on the wave of circumstance, not stupefied or overwhelmed by it.

For this task, language was a makeshift, because the great crises of feeling that he wished to reproduce, still more the settled moods of lofty peace that came to him among the mountains, existed altogether apart from language, and without any dependence on expression for their vitality. The drama that he tried to transfer to the poet's small stage was played from beginning to end in silence; it rested with him to translate it into words. And hence, in his view, poetry, the poetry of words and metre, was always a secondary thing, an imitation or reminiscence of something deeper in import than itself—a sort of chantry, so to say, where the souls of great moments that had perished on distant fields with never a word said might be commemorated by the voice of piety.

The attempt might well seem as vain as the attempt to paint a picture of a sunset. No sooner is the living experience repeated than the books all seem empty, and false, and superfluous. The silence of a damp evening in early autumn, when the clouds rest like a weight upon the horizon, and the cattle are ghosts in the twilight, and the trees and hills wear an appearance of gray expectant suffering, in a stillness so absolute that the whole scene seems laid for the sudden signal that never comes, to change it and end it; the talk of the summer wind among the trees, monotonous and ceaseless,

as the leaves are lifted and fall and are lifted again; the glow of a field of ripe corn, so poorly likened to gold; the sheen of wide waters in the evening, not really like silver or steel, daily observed and never the same, or, if the same, never remembered well enough to prevent another surprise—how should the actual impressions of these things be preserved in the speech of the market-place? They can never be described to those who have not known them, and those who have known them know also how little language avails to reanimate the pale memory.

This difficulty, no doubt, attends on all poetry; but the experiences that Wordsworth took for his poetic material are those which adapt themselves least readily to verbal expression. Poetry that deals with the social relationships of mankind, or with the truths of the discursive intellect—the poetry of human character, morality, and wit—finds the stuff of its building ready to its hand, in need of no such transmuting. The thing that happens, in these cases, involves the words—sometimes, indeed, the words themselves are the only thing that happens. There is no Platonic idea of a pun; it represents nothing but itself; and the like is true of many of the conceits, epigrams, and antitheses of the school of poetry from which Wordsworth recoiled. He would have nothing to do with these, nor with the gymnastic of the intellect,

as it catches at particular points in things observed, and uses them for the exhibition of its activities. Analytic industry, he says, was less pleasing to him than the observation of affinities, the "creative energy," he calls it, which strives to grasp an unbroken unity in what is presented to it. The intellect works by definition and distinction; it resolves the pageant of the senses into a multitude of single independent things, and invents classifications even of the faculties of the mind, ranged in scale and order; but to what purpose, Wordsworth asks,

> If each most obvious and particular thought,
> Not in a mystical and idle sense,
> But in the words of Reason deeply weighed,
> Hath no beginning.

The whole energy of his mind was spent to reunite what man had put asunder, to fuse, in a holy passion, the differences that are invented by the near-sighted activities of the discriminating human intellect. His own thought, as he truly says, was all "steeped in feeling":—

> I was only then
> Contented, when with bliss ineffable
> I felt the sentiment of Being spread
> *O'er all that moves and all that seemeth still*;
> O'er all that, lost beyond the reach of thought
> And human knowledge, to the human eye
> Invisible, yet liveth to the heart;

O'er all that leaps and runs, and shouts and sings,
Or beats the gladsome air ; o'er all that glides
Beneath the wave, yea, in the wave itself,
And mighty depth of waters.

This purpose and temper brought him out of sympathy not only, as has already been shown, with dialectic and logic, but even with morality, as morality is commonly understood. The behaviour of his fellows, especially where it immediately affects his own welfare, is the subject of all others which has the liveliest interest for man, and which often preoccupies him so entirely that it determines his view of the Universe and blinds him to what lies beyond itself. Such a blindness had fallen on John Stuart Mill at the time when the reading of Wordsworth's poems made an epoch in his life. "From them," he says, "I seemed to learn what would be the perennial sources of happiness, when all the greater evils of life shall have been removed." But even Mill postpones the happiness to the grim business of reform—as if a sick man should make a vow to taste no food till his recovery is complete. It is not the least of the sacrifices made by social reformers and those who do battle with the active evils of an age that they often disable their own capacity for simple happiness, so that if their ends were all attained, they would find nothing to occupy their thoughts. Like men who have spent a lifetime in accumulating

wealth, they become unable to enjoy the fruits of their labours. And not reformers and rich men only, but many poets also would find their occupation gone if they lived in a golden world of peace and innocence. In such a world the poetic works of Alexander Pope—as much of them as would be appreciated—might be published in the outward form of a religious tract. But the Canticle of St. Francis and many of the greatest poems of Wordsworth would not suffer the loss of a line.

It is inevitable, while man lives in the world as it is, that his poetry should reflect the knowledge of good and evil. Morality colours all language, and lends to it the most delicate of its powers of distinction. Take from a poet his moral reflections, his saws, and his sentences; you rob him of his most effective instrument. It is by these, indeed, rather than by his constructive or exploratory powers, that Shakespeare holds his most popular title. A poet who coins proverbs and gives point and polish to moral truth is a poet whose fortune is quickly made. But how, except in some completely transcendental sense, can a moral expression be given to a sunset? No clearly rounded period can reproduce that marvel, with all its vague messages to the heart. And it was this sort of power and this sort of beauty that was the inspiration of Wordsworth's poetry. He did not undervalue another sort of beauty, which

appeals chiefly to the intellect—the beauty of contrivance, of perfect adaptation to an end, which makes a steam-engine or a masterly game of chess a source of pure joy. But this is a beauty imposed by the active intelligence of man on the shapeless material that comes to his hand. So also does human morality, in so far as it takes its origin from the necessities of social life, impose itself on the raw material of society. There is no question here of the intuitions of a great prophet or teacher, but simply of that wide field of social judgment and social sanction, far wider than the operation of any definite enactments, where the moral sense of a community imposes itself on the tastes and habits of the individual and brings order out of chaos. But the contriving power of the intelligence and the assertive power of the will are equally at a loss in the presence of the mighty things of Nature. They cannot impose themselves on a sunset. Curious searchings and strenuous purposes must be laid aside if man is to approach Nature in the right humble temper—he must bring with him only "a heart that watches and receives."

Four short poems written at Alfoxden in the spring of 1798—the *Lines written in Early Spring*, the verses *To my Sister*, and the twin poems called *Expostulation and Reply* and the *Tables Turned*—contain the first full expression of this most essential part of Wordsworth's poetic teaching:—

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music! on my life,
There's more of wisdom in it.

And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!
He, too, is no mean preacher:
Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your teacher.

She has a world of ready wealth,
Our minds and hearts to bless—
Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,
Truth breathed by cheerfulness.

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—
We murder to dissect.

The last three stanzas are a condensed and profound expression of a thought that Wordsworth never tired of repeating; the *Prelude* and the *Excursion* are very largely commentaries on this text. Mr. John Morley, it is true, will have it that these verses are only the poet's fun. "It is best," he says, "to be entirely sceptical as to the existence of system and ordered philosophy in Wordsworth. When he tells us that

"One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can,

such a proposition cannot be seriously taken as more than a half-playful sally for the benefit of some too bookish friend. No impulse from a vernal wood can teach us anything at all of moral evil and of good." If this be so, then Wordsworth himself can teach us nothing at all of moral evil and of good. The secret of his strength is stolen from him. It was this very entanglement, which ties up all moral teaching to the dry bones of system and ordered philosophy, that Wordsworth tried to cut through. It is best, at any rate, and wisest to disbelieve any one who says that a great poet does not mean that which he many times solemnly asserts. The thought recurs in the verses *To my Sister*:—

Love, now a universal birth,
From heart to heart is stealing,
From earth to man, from man to earth:
—It is the hour of feeling.

One moment now may give us more
Than years of toiling reason:
Our minds shall drink at every pore
The spirit of the season.

Some silent laws our hearts will make,
Which they shall long obey:

We for the year to come may take
Our temper from to-day.

Let us treat this matter in prose. The right knowledge of good and evil depends largely on the actual content of the two ideas as they are conceived by the mind. And that content may be immeasurably enriched by experiences which involve no exercise of the toiling reason, and are quite independent of all ordered philosophy. A moral philosopher, indeed, may attain to unimpeachable conclusions and yet have very imperfect ideas of morality because his conceptions of good and evil are meagre and languid—his black is brown and his white is merely grey. No one who is not capable of great happiness can be a highly moral being. And the happiness that comes to a soul from finely attuned sympathies with all the joyful impulses of Nature seemed to Wordsworth to be, in the deepest and most serious sense, a factor of morality. In the *Lines written above Tintern Abbey* he repeats his conviction that these feelings of unremembered pleasure are

such, perhaps,
As may have had no trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life,
His little, nameless, unremembered acts
Of kindness and of love.

The natural counterpart to this belief is expressed most clearly in the first of the four poems

mentioned above. Wordsworth held it to be true, in sober fact, that pleasure and pain and the moral life which man is apt to claim as his prerogative have a domain as wide as what is called "animated Nature"—and wider :—

Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,
The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;
And 'tis my faith that every flower
Enjoys the air it breathes.

The birds around me hopped and played,
Their thoughts I cannot measure :—
But the least motion which they made
It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

The budding twigs spread out their fan
To catch the breezy air;
And I must think, do all I can,
That there was pleasure there.

But this again, says Mr. Morley—so far at least as the flowers and twigs are concerned, for he does not challenge the birds—is "a charming poetic fancy and no more." Since an eloquent admirer of the poet reads him thus, it seems not idle to try to show that what Wordsworth here calls his faith is the corner-stone of his poetry and no less. In his early days, as he tells in the Second and Third Books of the *Prelude*, it was by this way that he mounted to "community with highest truth" :—

To every natural form, rock, fruits, or flower,
Even the loose stones that cover the highway,

I gave a moral life: I saw them feel,
Or linked them to some feeling: the great mass
Lay bedded in a quickening soul, and all
That I beheld respired with inward meaning.

And a few lines farther on he anticipates criticism:—

Some called it madness—so indeed it was,
If child-like fruitfulness in passing joy,
If steady moods of thoughtfulness matured
To inspiration, sort with such a name;
If prophecy be madness; if things viewed
By poets in old time, and higher up
By the first men, earth's first inhabitants,
May in these tutored days no more be seen
With undisordered sight.

In the Ninth Book of the *Excursion* the Wanderer asserts as doctrine what the poet, in the *Lines written above Tintern Abbey*, had expressed as feeling. In every form of Being he finds an active Principle—in stars, clouds, flowers, trees, stones, rocks, the waters, the air, and the mind of man—

Spirit that knows no insulated spot,
No chasm, no solitude; from link to link
It circulates, the Soul of all the worlds.

Might, wisdom, joy, peace, these were not qualities projected by the imagination of man into a lifeless universe, but qualities that exist outside of man, and may pass into his life, if only he will be quiet and will attend.

It is this belief, with all its consequences, which

makes Wordsworth's attitude to Nature a very different thing from what, by an appropriate theatrical analogy, is called a love of beautiful "scenery." His stage was bare of scenery, and held nothing but the actors. And this made him feel a special sympathy for Greek myth—a sympathy expressed at length in the Fourth Book of the *Excursion*, and yet more feelingly in one of the best known of his sonnets. It was from as intense a love of natural things as was ever felt by the pagans, and from a far greater familiarity with them, that Wordsworth's imagination peopled the lonely places. In early civilisations men are never really familiar with wild Nature—she is too dangerous. The Greeks themselves clung close to the shelter of the city, and to this day, in all countries, the peasant is reluctant to be abroad in the dark. But Wordsworth from early childhood had been a wanderer at all hours. "Let the moon," he says to his sister,

> Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
> And let the misty mountain winds be free
> To blow against thee.

The streams and trees and hills showed him no human faces; he loved them for themselves, and recognised in them a kindred vitality. In his sonnet of 1815, to the brook, he disclaims the forms of the Greek imagination:—

If wish were mine some type of thee to view,
Thee, and not thee thyself, I would not do
Like Grecian Artists, give thee human cheeks,
Channels for tears; no Naiad should'st thou be,—
Have neither limbs, feet, feathers, joints nor hairs:
It seems the Eternal Soul is clothed in thee
With purer robes than those of flesh and blood,
And hath bestowed on thee a safer good;
Unwearied joy, and life without its cares.

This fixed conception of a life animating all things may be found also in that passage of the First Book of the *Prelude* where is described the weird adventure of the poet's boyhood, how the mountain seemed to rise up and pursue him, and in the poem on *Nutting*, and—not to multiply needless illustrations—in a hundred other places.

These other lives that surround him may become, Wordsworth said,—and he is to be taken seriously,—man's teachers. Power and virtue may pass from them to him, if he will submit to their influence. But he must be initiated in the right art of learning. And here again the Alfoxden poems contain the most compact statement:—

The eye—it cannot choose but see;
We cannot bid the ear be still;
Our bodies feel, where'er they be,
Against or with our will.

Nor less I deem that there are Powers
Which of themselves our minds impress;

That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness.

Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum
Of things for ever speaking,
That nothing of itself will come,
But we must still be seeking?

If only the eye and the ear be open and the mind free from preoccupation and the innumerable disquieting movements of mental self-assertion, Nature will do the rest, and we have but to be passive. How little open the eye and ear generally are may be observed by any one who will take notice of the first hundred faces that he sees on the road, and will search among them for those that wear an expression consistent with the attitude of "wise passiveness." "An idle poet here and there looks round him," ready to be delighted by what he sees, but for the most of men it needs some strong and deep emotion to shake them out of the lethargy of custom and to grant them for a brief space the full enjoyment of their senses. Wordsworth held that the mood he so valued, the "happy stillness of the mind," can be induced. Just as the muscles, we are told, can be developed by a concentrated attention given to the slowest natural movements, so he believed that the strivings of the intellect can be put away by a voluntary relaxation of the will, and the receptive possibilities of the whole nature enormously increased.

For Nature's favoured children no such effort is needful; they have the secret by instinct, and are educated under the charge of Nature herself. By the education of Nature, Wordsworth meant a real process, not a series of ingenious analogies. In *Ruth* he describes how winds and tempests, the splendours and languors of the tropics, nourished wild impulses and voluptuous tendencies in the heart of the young soldier; but these influences, he adds, were not wholly evil—

> For passions linked to forms so fair
> And stately, needs must have their share
> Of noble sentiment.

And in the wonderful poem on the education of Lucy he speaks mystically, perhaps, but not fancifully :—

> The stars of midnight shall be dear
> To her; and she shall lean her ear
> In many a secret place
> Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
> And beauty born of murmuring sound
> Shall pass into her face.

A real discipline of the mind and heart must surely be obtainable from Nature, if Nature be, as Wordsworth conceived her,

> A Power
> That is the visible quality and shape
> And image of right reason; that matures
> Her processes by steadfast laws; gives birth

To no impatient or fallacious hopes,
No heat of passion or excessive zeal,
No vain conceits; provokes to no quick turns
Of self-applauding intellect; but trains
To meekness and exalts by humble faith;
Holds up before the mind intoxicate
With present objects, and the busy dance
Of things that pass away, a temperate show
Of objects that endure.

Men of sound practical sense may be impatient of these conclusions. They will humour poetic license, but they must not be asked seriously to believe that there is a moral life in the material world, that trees enjoy the air they breathe, or that the motion of clouds and willows can teach grace to a girl. They may be right; but what they must not say is that Wordsworth does not believe these things.

Man, the Moralist, is not very quick to recognise moral capacity in anything that cannot talk. He fears an extension of the moral franchise, lest it should diminish his own dignity. When Thoreau said that if ever he got to heaven he should expect to find the pine-trees there, and still above him, he offended cultured Boston. And if Wordsworth does not offend, neither does he convince the Moralist when he professes feelings of fraternal love for "the unassuming things that hold a silent station in this beauteous world."

But the real issue lies deeper than this. Nature,

it is urged, is cruel, and careless of the happiness of her millions of subjects. The woods where the poet found refreshment are a battlefield and a slaughter-house for other creatures. Pain and fear and bloodshed are a part of the law of life. This is no new truth, but it has been presented in a new and impressive guise by biological science. Did Wordsworth fail to realise it; did the seclusion and the peacefulness of his way of life limit the range of his imaginative vision and, to some extent at least, vitiate his thinking? It is a crucial inquiry, and Wordsworth's claim to the title of a great poet depends on the verdict. He wished to bring consolation to men, and the consolation that is obtained by shutting the eyes to fact is a poor gift for a poet to offer. If his optimism be no stronger in fibre than the genial good-temper, nourished by easy circumstances, which sometimes masquerades under that name, if it take no account of problems that were an old story when the Book of Job was written, he may still be a pleasant companion for a summer afternoon; a great teacher of mankind he cannot be.

To say that Wordsworth had considered the question at issue, and, so far as it can be answered, had answered it for himself, is not to say that his solution is valid for others. In that sense the question never can be answered. The opposed camps represent two ways of feeling in

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regard to the admitted facts, not two methods of reasoning. There will always be those who conceive of man, at his best and highest, as a martyr in the arena of brute forces, maintaining a faith that burns all the brighter in the midst of the dark devices of his insensate and cruel enemies. Such a view of human life is natural to a dramatic temper. It groups all other facts round the strange and moving fact of death, and sees life by the light of that crisis. Perhaps it is not the view of the martyr himself, who is fearless and happy in his death, as in his life, but rather the view of his shuddering friends among the onlookers. For them the by-gone quiet years of labour, and sympathy, and delight in common things are well-nigh blotted out under that intolerable spectacle. To these tragic elements in life there must be added, moreover, all the dull dead weight of daily and hourly suffering which is relieved by no hope and lightened by no sense of a cause, all the pain and weariness of man, and all the mute anguish of the other creatures.

Wordsworth does not deny these things, and that he pondered them and felt them deeply is plain enough to any reader of his poems. His pathos is an unmitigated, hard pathos, beyond the reach of sentimental palliatives. His sympathy with the humbler animals brings their sufferings,

too, within the pale of tragedy, as in *Hart-leap Well*, where he guesses at the memories that must have passed through the brain of the hunted creature when it directed its course, after a thirteen hours' desperate chase, to the fountain where it died :—

> Here on the grass perhaps asleep he sank,
> Lulled by the fountain in the summer-tide ;
> This water was perhaps the first he drank
> When he had wandered from his mother's side.

The poet does not make light of such suffering ; he invokes no special providences to justify it or rectify it, but leaves it unintelligible and awful. If he is moved to no protest, and does not permit these solemn facts to cast a gloom over his view of creation, this is not due to insensibility. But here, as elsewhere, he attempts to alter and widen the perspective, to set man at a point of view whence he may see things more truly and less partially.

It was happiness that Wordsworth taught—like every other poet. And this happiness was a happiness found, not made. His poems are one long and various exposition of "the grand elementary principle of pleasure," as he calls it, "by which man knows, and feels, and lives, and moves." He could not conceive of being save as happiness, which, thwarted and checked in one direction, is, like a stream, diverted merely to

seek another outlet. He found this principle of joy animating all nature, and, so far as his contemplations carried him, he saw it in all human life. Except during his early residence in London, he had little acquaintance with great cities, and he acknowledges that these crowded and confused masses of struggling humanity produce a sense of "oppression, under which even highest minds must labour." Yet he did not shrink from this test; the unmanageable sight may be resolved into its simpler elements by the mind of him "who looks in steadiness"; and even of London he writes:—

> The Spirit of Nature was upon me there;
> The soul of Beauty and enduring Life
> Vouchsafed her inspiration, and diffused,
> Through meagre lines and colours, and the press
> Of self-destroying, transitory things,
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He was not a dramatic poet; and he did not explore the darkest recesses of the soul. It is not physical tortures nor the intellectual and moral throes of a Hamlet which give the most disquieting pause to thought on these dim

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When, under a dusky, damp pall of smoke and fog, on a chill and comfortless morning, the hum and stir of a great city begins again, when the streets are full of hurrying figures and the air is tortured with jarring noises, what, after all, is the real motive-power of this bewildering machinery? Are these people only fleeing from death? Are they the puppet-show of an ironic Fate that makes them dance on the strings of blind desire? Or is it the eternal joy of life, in

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questions, but base suffering and the pangs of craven fear in a selfish and cruel nature. When Browning has exhibited in all their workings the heart and mind of his Count Guido, he is almost compelled to suppose, resolute optimist though he be, that the very existence of such a nature is a foul anomaly, serving some mysterious purpose, giving opportunity, perhaps, to the rarest human virtues, but, for itself, doomed to merciful dissolution in some dark limbo,

> Where God unmakes but to remake the soul.

Pain and evil, as Wordsworth saw them, did not shake his faith in the law of happiness. Indeed, in their tragic forms they bear their own testimony to the law which they break. The deprivation of light and air is what makes the horror of a dungeon. Without happiness for its background tragedy is inconceivable. It is in a world of filial affection and married happiness that the tragedies of Oedipus and Lear and Othello become possible. For the true pessimist the keenest sufferings are merely specially perfect examples of the universal rule, and that pessimist spoke consistently who said, "Life is not a tragedy, but a farcical melodrama, which is the worst kind of play." Wordsworth's view of the world, therefore, so far from being inconsistent with the view of the greatest tragic poets, is a

necessary complement to theirs. He saw the things that they saw, and left them not wholly unrecorded. But, for the most part, he strove, here as elsewhere, to call attention to the neglected background, to show how real a thing is "joy in widest commonalty spread," how the loves and loyalties, the pleasures and consolations that are the sustenance of common life are as fit a theme for poetry as the heroic achievements and rare passions of romance. The air that we breathe, he held, should have its sacred bard.

No doctrine of the struggle for existence could have impaired this faith. Modern science cannot number suffering among its discoveries; what it has done, rather, is to exhibit the sufferings of countless creatures as part of a large scheme of progress, and thereby to lend to them a certain sacrificial dignity. Science has widened man's outlook on created things, and this in itself is a kind of magnanimous happiness. "The horizon of sorrow," says M. Maeterlinck, "surveyed from the height of a thought that has ceased to be selfish, instinctive, or commonplace, differs but little from the horizon of happiness when this last is regarded from the height of a thought of similar nature, but other in origin. After all, it matters but little whether the clouds be golden or gloomy that yonder float over the plain; the traveller is glad to have reached the eminence whence his eye

may at last repose on illimitable space. The sea is not the less marvellous and mysterious to us though white sails be not for ever flitting over its surface; and neither tempest nor day that is radiant and calm is able to bring enfeeblement into the life of our soul. Enfeeblement comes through our dwelling, by night and by day, in the airless room of our cold, self-satisfied, trivial, ungenerous thoughts, at a time when the sky all around our abode is reflecting the light of the ocean."

It was a rare joy that Wordsworth felt in common things. The things that inspired it were not little things important only by their multitude, but great things overlooked because of their omnipresence :—

> The primal duties shine aloft—like stars;
> The charities that soothe, and heal, and bless,
> Are scattered at the feet of Man—like flowers.

He meditated on these gifts with a fixed gaze which produced in him transports of worship and love like those of the mystics. In the *Life of the Learned and Pious Dr. Henry More* (1710), by Richard Ward, there are passages, descriptive of these ecstasies of joy, which might truly be applied to Wordsworth :—

> He hath professed soberly to some; *That he hath been sometimes almost Mad with Pleasure:* (The ex-

perienc'd will easily understand how to take the Expression). And *that, walking abroad after his Studies, his Sallies towards Nature would be often unexpressibly enravishing, and beyond what he could convey to others. . . .* He enjoy'd his Maker in All the Parts of the Universe; and saw the Marks both of his Counsel and Benignity in All. Nay, he was transported, we have seen, with Wonder, as well as Pleasure, even in the Contemplation of those things that are here below. And he was so enamour'd, as I may say, with the Wisdom of God in the Contrivance of things; that he hath been heard to say, *A good Man could be sometimes ready, in his own private Reflections, to kiss the very Stones of the Street.*

A simple, irrepressible joy in things is the motive of many of Wordsworth's shorter poems. His heart leaps up when he beholds a rainbow in the sky. The daffodils, dancing in the breeze, fill him with the spirit of gaiety, and live in his mind and heart, a joyful memory. His poetry does not convert these things into food for reflection; it is the mark of all mystics that they make the intellect feed the emotions, not the emotions the intellect. He tries to catch the experience, just as it was, and to preserve its brightness. And this made his poems a butt for ridicule; his joy in trivial things seemed a trivial joy, which it was not. Perhaps the best example of this extreme simplicity is to be found in the poem beginning—

Among all lovely things my Love had been,

where he records with the eager fervour of a child how on a stormy night he found a glow-worm, and, knowing that Lucy had never seen one, took it quietly into her orchard,

> And left the glow-worm, blessing it by name,
> Laid safely by itself, beneath a tree.

The inexperienced reader will now expect a plot—a revolution of fortune from good to bad. There is no such revolution, except in the excited alternations of hope and fear in the mind of the poet. The glow-worm stayed where it was placed :—

> The whole next day I hoped, and hoped with fear;
> At night the glow-worm shone beneath the tree;
> I led my Lucy to the spot, "Look here!"
> Oh! joy it was for her, and joy for me!

And with that joy the poem closes.

A poet's delight in Nature is sometimes shown in his loving and minute descriptions of natural objects. But the business of description commonly gives only too much work to the "meddling intellect." The usual resources of poetic description appear in that poem on the Daisy where the flower is compared to a nun, a queen, a cyclops, a fairy shield, a star. But Wordsworth knows that this is simply a pleasant pastime for the fancy :—

> Oft on the dappled turf at ease
> I sit, and play with similes,

Loose types of things through all degrees,
Thoughts of thy raising;
And many a fond and idle name
I give to thee, for praise or blame,
As is the humour of the game,
While I am gazing.

His descriptions never stray far from the object before him, and sometimes are the work of the most delicate observation. The poem on the *Green Linnet* was praised by Coleridge for its accurate loveliness:—

Amid yon tuft of hazel trees,
That twinkle to the gusty breeze,
Behold him perched in ecstasies,
Yet seeming still to hover;
There! where the flutter of his wings
Upon his back and body flings
Shadows and sunny glimmerings,
That cover him all over.

Beauties like this are most frequent in his least ambitious poems, where his mind plays at ease and has time for observation. When his heart is deeply stirred the description is almost drowned in the emotion. So in his account of his cliff-climbing after the raven's nest:—

Oh, at that time
While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
Blow through my ear! The sky seemed not a sky
Of earth—and with what motion moved the clouds!

where he records with the eager fervour of a child how on a stormy night he found a glow-worm, and, knowing that Lucy had never seen one, took it quietly into her orchard,

> And left the glow-worm, blessing it by name,
> Laid safely by itself, beneath a tree.

The inexperienced reader will now expect a plot—a revolution of fortune from good to bad. There is no such revolution, except in the excited alternations of hope and fear in the mind of the poet. The glow-worm stayed where it was placed :—

> The whole next day I hoped, and hoped with fear ;
> At night the glow-worm shone beneath the tree ;
> I led my Lucy to the spot, "Look here !"
> Oh ! joy it was for her, and joy for me !

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At such times he is not so much an observer as a priest of Nature. Love and awe possess him wholly, and make his voice to sound like the voice of great natural forces. He almost becomes what he aspires to be, a presence and a motion, an equal among mightiest energies. In Shakespeare's time the terrors of the mediæval imagination still held sway, and for Claudio, in *Measure for Measure*, the middle air is still the abode of demons and lost souls :—

> To be imprisoned in the viewless winds,
> And blown with restless violence round about
> The pendent world ; or to be worse than worst
> Of those that lawless and incertain thoughts
> Imagine howling : 'tis too horrible!

But Wordsworth, in his passionate desire for oneness with Nature, finds a heaven of delight in the very fate that Claudio so dreaded : —

> Oh! what a joy it were, in vigorous health,
> To have a body (this our vital frame
> With shrinking sensibility endued,
> And all the nice regards of flesh and blood)
> And to the elements surrender it
> As if it were a spirit !—How divine,
> The liberty, for frail, for mortal man
> To roam at large among unpeopled glens
> And mountainous retirements, only trod
> By devious footsteps ; regions consecrate
> To oldest time ! and, reckless of the storm
> That keeps the raven quiet in her nest,

Be as a presence or a motion—one
Among the many there; and while the mists
Flying, and rainy vapours, call out shapes
And phantoms from the crags and solid earth
As fast as a musician scatters sounds
Out of an instrument; and while the streams
(As at a first creation and in haste
To exercise their untried faculties)
Descending from the region of the clouds,
And starting from the hollows of the earth
More multitudinous every moment, rend
Their way before them—what a joy to roam
An equal among mightiest energies;
And haply sometimes with articulate voice,
Amid the deafening tumult, scarcely heard
By him that utters it, exclaim aloud,
"Rage on, ye elements! let moon and stars
Their aspects lend, and mingle in their turn
With this commotion (ruinous though it be)
From day to night, from night to day, prolonged!"

The spirit of science, which has found no loftier or loyaller prophet than Wordsworth, may have cast a chill and a shadow of uncertainty on some of man's most ancient hopes. But it has loosened the clutch of fear at his heart, and has taught him that the universe is not like his morbid dreams, grotesque and indecent. It has shown him that joy and sacrifice are eternal principles of nature, and that he need not transgress the natural to find the marvellous. It has left scope enough for the loftiest imagination and the deepest insight of any poet who "rejoices in the presence of truth as

our visible friend and hourly companion." And Wordsworth, by fulfilling this ideal, has given substance and meaning to his own splendid definition :—"Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science."

CHAPTER V

HUMANITY

WORDSWORTH'S exaltation of Nature as the best teacher of man might seem to involve him in difficulties. He held fast to the loftiest conception of the poet's office, and advanced the largest claims for the poet's power to benefit mankind. But if to live in communion with Nature, to enter by sympathy into her greater and more elemental life, be the most enlightening discipline for mankind, this highest reach of wisdom may be achieved by men who never wrote or read a single line of verse. What need of priests and temples if the temple of Nature stands open, and all that the priest can do is to comment, in poor and halting language, on the mysteries there discovered to the sincere worshipper?

This difficulty is admitted, or rather emphatically asserted, by Wordsworth. It appears in the *Excursion*:—

Oh! many are the Poets that are sown
By Nature; men endowed with highest gifts,
The vision and the faculty divine;
Yet wanting the accomplishment of verse;

. . . . . .

These favoured Beings,
All but a scattered few, live out their time,
Husbanding that which they possess within,
And go to the grave, unthought of.

And again, yet more emphatically, in the Third Book of the *Prelude*:—

There's not a man
That lives who hath not known his god-like hours,
And feels not what an empire we inherit
As natural beings in the strength of Nature.

Does the poet differ from other men only by virtue of his gift of expression, which is greater than theirs by nature, and has been improved and strengthened by constant practice? Is it the chief of his business, as an earlier poet believed, to give utterance to "what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed"?

In the preface to the later editions of the *Lyrical Ballads*, where he gives a careful analysis of the character of the poet, Wordsworth makes only the barest allusion to this essential gift of expression. Yet the delight in giving a resonant voice to feeling, the love of the exquisitely turned phrase and of the gorgeous trappings of imagery are found in many, if not all, of the best poets.

Both Shakespeare and Keats, in the days of their youth, fell head over ears in love with language. Of Shakespeare, indeed, it has been maintained, absurdly enough, but not without plausible argument, that his delight in voluble expression so far outran his powers of thought that it was only by some unknown accident of his prime that he became a thinking being and the world's greatest poet. Certainly it is possible in the case of Keats, whose poetic development can be traced from an earlier point, to note how growing powers of thought may take up and utilise the rich stores of diction and imagery that have been acquired by the devout student during his nonage. And Wordsworth had this same gift of expression, but, as he thought, it had misled him, and he did not prize it. The claims of a teacher and prophet must be deeper and surelier based than on a ready command of beautiful and appropriate speech. The poet, he says, is a man "who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions in the goings-on of the universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them."

It is chiefly, then, by his intenser and more concentrated powers of feeling and contemplation that a poet differs from other men. And these powers may reveal a new world. In the *Lines written above Tintern Abbey*, and often elsewhere, Wordsworth makes division of "all the mighty world of eye and ear" into "what they half-create, and what perceive." The shaping energy of the mind is never dormant. Perception itself is largely the work of imagination; it is a transaction between the outer powers which operate on the mind through the senses and the inner powers of the mind itself, which impose their own forms on the things submitted to it. This doctrine, which was perhaps matured in conversation with Coleridge, furnished Wordsworth with an explanation of the poet's creative faculty. He illustrates it, in the Fourteenth Book of the *Prelude*, from one of his own experiences in North Wales. He had climbed a mountain at night, when, suddenly, the Moon broke forth from behind a cloudy sky and revealed, at his feet, "a silent sea of hoary mist" islanding the dusky backs of a hundred hills, and at the same time, from below, now first heard, there mounted a roar of innumerable swollen torrents. The power thus exerted by Nature in giving so sublime a single aspect to the face of outward things is likened by the poet to the work of a majestic mind, brooding over the dark abyss,

moulding and subduing the mutations of the visible world and the vast expanse of the generations of mankind to the forms imposed on them by its own supremacy. All lasting grandeur in things perceived is a quality with which they are invested by the powers of the soul, by love, and by imagination—

> which, in truth,
> Is but another name for absolute power
> And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
> And Reason in her most exalted mood.

Reality, then, cannot be considered apart from the activities of the mind. The mind brings to the world of outward things not only the glass through which they are viewed, but the glass which throws on them the light that makes them visible. And therefore the study of the workings of the imagination of man affords a means of access to the knowledge of things as they are.

It was by this train of thought that Wordsworth was led to a curious and searching investigation of the habits of the human mind. "There is scarcely one of my poems," he writes to Lady Beaumont, "which does not aim to direct the attention to some moral sentiment, or to some general principle, or law of thought, of our intellectual constitution." He set himself to understand, so far as he might, the human agency which co-operates with external powers, and makes

beauty and grandeur possible. And so he learned and was able to teach,

how the mind of man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
On which he dwells, above this frame of things
(Which, 'mid all revolution in the hopes
And fears of men, doth still remain unchanged)
In beauty exalted, as it is itself
Of quality and fabric more divine.

To a careless apprehension poetry that directs the attention "to some moral sentiment, or to some general principle or law of thought" may seem dangerously like a handbook of mental philosophy. But the two things are worlds asunder. Wordsworth does not dissect the human mind; he watches it at work, in the hope that among the attitudes into which it is thrown by the free exertion of its powers he may find some happy posture that is an aid to vision. Painters are familiar with a device that helps the eye to a truer perception of the broad tones of a natural landscape; they stand facing in the opposite direction, and, by bending over, look at the object upside down. This washes away, as it were, all the commonplace plot-interest of the scene, and leaves the eye free to discern a more general and simpler truth. It is no exaggeration to say that Wordsworth practised a similar method in poetry. If he loves to trace the workings of the mind of a

distracted woman, or of a careless, happy child, or of a weak-witted person, it is always with the same hope. True vision, he held, is not to be attained by any sort of intellectual elaboration, but by a purging of the eye, an intense and rare simplicity of outlook. He was haunted by a sense that truth was there, directly before him, filling the whole compass of the universe—the greatest and most obvious and clearest of all things, if only the eye could learn to see it. But the tricky and ill-trained sense of man moves vacantly over its surface and finds nothing to arrest attention; sees nothing, indeed, until it is caught by the antics of some of its old accomplices. Just so a traveller may spend a day on a snow-mountain and see nothing but footmarks and hand-holds, until, when the eye is released from its preoccupation, it falls in with some chance-met relics of earlier adventurers, and sets the wits to work at their old task of inference, conjecture, and interpretation.

It may well be that these deceits and obstructions of vision are inseparable from mortal life. Yet glimpses of a deeper truth are obtainable, Wordsworth believed, if the right way be followed. For himself, he sought admittance to the mystery by two principal means. It is something to rid the mind of petty cares and to be still and attentive, but it is not enough. There are guides to the heights of contemplation; and there are fortunate

moments of excitement that roll away the clouds against which the traveller has long been straining his baffled eyesight. For one thing, then, Wordsworth sought, in his own mind and in the minds of others, the illumination which comes from the transfiguring power of high-wrought emotions,

Most worthy then of trust when most intense.

A man or a woman in such a state of excitement seemed to him already half inspired. The mind thus excited becomes almost miraculously clear, the perceptions are strangely vivid, and the associations of ideas are rapid, instinctive, and surprising. But this is illumination by the lightning-flash; it is precarious, and uncontrollable, and brief. A steadier light came to him from the second of his two resources: the unsophisticated perceptions and thoughts of children and of the peasantry, of half-witted human creatures and of the animals that are nearer to earth than we, lent him a more companionable guidance, and to these spiritual directors he submitted his heart in humble reverence and gratitude.

He came to these teachers in no mood of artless companionship, but intent on what he might learn; he was an acolyte, not a boon-fellow. His own unresting thoughts drove him into strange courses; his steadfast following of the gleam led him into unfamiliar company. The dalesmen whom Canon

Rawnsley questioned could hardly be induced to recount their reminiscences of the greater poet when once the figure of Hartley Coleridge, who "knawed the insides of cottages for miles round, and was welcome at 'em all," rose into their memory and warmed their affections. "Wudsworth was no dog-fancier," said one of them, who had been in his service, "and as for cats, he couldn't abide them; and he didn't care for sheep, or horses, a deal, but if he was fond of onything it was of *li'le ponies.* He was a man of fancies, ye kna. It was a fancy of his. He was fond of li'le ponies." And when it was suggested that he must have been fond of children,—"Ay, ay," said the same recorder, "he was fond of children, like enough, but children was niver vara fond o' him. Ye see he was a man o' moods, niver no certainty about him."

It is likely enough that children were never very fond of him. They are quick to discern the presence of a foreigner, or of one who looks at them instead of looking the way that they look. Wordsworth was looking in the opposite direction; he longed

> to travel back
> And tread again that ancient track,

if haply he might come nearer than other explorers to the starting-point. When he met a child he would embarrass it with questions, uttered or

implied, as to its past history and its present opinions. But children are themselves an eager and practical-minded race of explorers, intent on the future, very ready to believe in the wisdom of their elders, very grateful for help in the forward journey, and, like all practical people, not a little suspicious and intolerant of those who treat them as oracles and arrest the business of life to make inquiry concerning the soul. Mutual friendship is impossible between two inhabitants of different countries when each is so keenly anxious to learn that neither is willing to teach.

The *Ode* on *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* contains a general statement of the doctrine which receives particular application in many of the shorter poems :—

> Our childhood sits,
> Our simple childhood, sits upon a throne
> That hath more power than all the elements.

In a prose note to the *Ode*, written in his later years, the poet thought it right to protest against a conclusion which, he says, had given pain to some good and pious persons, namely, that he meant to inculcate a belief in a prior state of existence. These good and pious persons, who have long ago done with speculation, and who fear lest the air of heaven should reach them through an unstopped chink in their creed, are responsible for many of

Wordsworth's later prosy utterances. But his disclaimer here is of interest. It was not by an acquaintance with Platonic philosophy that he arrived at his glorification of childhood, but by looking at nature and life with an open mind. The greater scholars of the Renaissance were, many of them, Platonists; they took the writings of Plato for a second Bible, to be accepted, expounded, and glossed, text by text. Wordsworth sought help from a nearer source for difficulties that sprang from his daily perceptions and memories. Why does the world seem phantasmal to the perceptions of a child? Whence come those sudden monitions which start up from the wayside of life and, speaking to the mind in an unknown language, awaken vague echoes in the memory? What is the meaning of the preferences which the mind itself, for no assignable reason, exercises among common objects —the little gusts of liking and suspicion that affect it, as if it knew its old friends and enemies under their disguise? These feelings fade by degrees out of the experience of mature man; they are dominated and driven out by the operation of the reasoning powers, and by the necessity laid upon man of adapting himself to this present world. Are they the relics of a lost sense? They are stronger in children; and if Wordsworth finds cause for gratitude and praise in the experiences of childhood, it is not chiefly, he says, from admira-

implied, as to its past history and its present opinions. But children are themselves an eager and practical-minded race of explorers, intent on the future, very ready to believe in the wisdom of their elders, very grateful for help in the forward journey, and, like all practical people, not a little suspicious and intolerant of those who treat them as oracles and arrest the business of life to make inquiry concerning the soul. Mutual friendship is impossible between two inhabitants of different countries when each is so keenly anxious to learn that neither is willing to teach.

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tion for the child's illimitable faith in happiness, and hope, and liberty :—

> Not for these I raise
> The song of thanks and praise;
> But for those obstinate questionings
> Of sense and outward things,
> Fallings from us, vanishings;
> Blank misgivings of a Creature
> Moving about in worlds not realised,
> High instincts before which our mortal Nature
> Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised:
> But for those first affections,
> Those shadowy recollections,
> Which, be they what they may,
> Are yet the fountain light of all our day,
> Are yet a master light of all our seeing.

Habitually his mind turned back to this source of light. The experiences he most values are those which carry him farthest on the backward road. He listens to the cuckoo with delight, for it reminds him of his school-boy days, and helps him to "beget that golden time again," when the world seemed "an unsubstantial fairy place." Or he hears the mountain Echo giving back the shouts of the cuckoo, and straightway thinks of the reverberations and intelligences that come to us we know not whence :—

> Such rebounds our inward ear
> Catches sometimes from afar—

Listen, ponder, hold them dear;
For of God,—of God they are.

The fascination that children had for him is best and most curiously illustrated by the poems founded on incidents of his conversation with them. These poems, which are accurate records of real occurrences, derive all their interest from the dramatic situation, the game of cross-purposes played between the poet and the oracles whom he consulted. He was attracted by the very indifference of children to the things on which he was brooding; if they evade discussion, he thinks, it is because they have a more direct access to the truth. Those who read to find fault may very easily quarrel with the address to the child in the *Ode*—

thou Eye among the blind,
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind;

but those who read to find a meaning will not be disappointed. The child, to put it baldly, would neither listen to the poet nor answer him, but was absorbed in its own converse, and intent upon its own vision. In *We are Seven* it is the matter-of-fact simplicity of the little cottage girl, her refusal to share in his wonder at the mysteries of life and death that seems to him a marvellous thing. In vain he attempts to put the question :—

You run about, my little Maid,
Your limbs they are alive;
If two are in the church-yard laid
Then ye are only five.

The child finds no metaphysical difficulties in the fact of her own life, and no matter for dubious investigation in the change to another state. All things to her are credible and obvious. And this clearness, thought Wordsworth, in so unintelligible a world, can be due only to some inner light.

In the *Anecdote for Fathers* the question asked of the little boy was a random experiment, as the poet confesses. Would he rather be at Kilve, by the sea-shore, or here at Liswyn farm? The child, hoping perhaps for an end of this matter, replies that he prefers Kilve. But the poet, not to be denied, insists on learning a reason for the preference, and makes the poor child unhappy by his repeated questions. Dr. Johnson, on a similar provocation, did swift execution upon his questioner:—"I will not be put to the *question*. Don't you consider, sir, that these are not the manners of a gentleman? I will not be baited with *what* and *why*; what is this? what is that? why is a cow's tail long? why is a fox's tail bushy?" But children are only half-articulate, and the boy, seeking for help from the all-engrossing visible world, looks around for something

wherewith to buy off the attacks of this absurd and aggressive grown-up person. His eye catches a weather-cock, and he presents it, with ready tact and courtesy, to the poet :—

> At Kilve there was no weather-cock ;
> And that's the reason why.

Wordsworth points the moral of the incident, with perfect candour, against himself. In this way, as his original title to the poem indicates, the art of lying may be taught. But, once more, is not the art of reasoning, the art even of coherent speech, a kind of art of lying? This idea, and not any formal insistence on veracity, is the motive of the poem. The boy had clear enough perceptions and tastes of his own, but when he was compelled to argue the case he was driven to a makeshift. Intuition is vindicated again, and the poet gratefully takes the lesson to heart.

One more illustration of this phase of his discipleship must suffice. In the poem called *Beggars* he appropriates and versifies an experience of his sister's, recorded in her *Journal*. Two ragged boys, seen by the poet, are in the wildest high spirits, chasing a butterfly. They drop their sport, and, assuming a professional whine, beg an alms. Their mother, they say, is dead. He reproves them for lying ; not half an hour ago he has given alms to their mother, whom he met

upon the road. When once they see that persistence is useless, they cast off the suppliant manner and lose no time in returning to their interrupted play. The business of life is a troublesome piece of assumption, gladly thrown aside in favour of the joy of life. This moral, which is pointed by the poem, is absent from the *Journal*. The real beggars, as described by Dorothy Wordsworth, were more diligent in their profession. "Says the elder, 'Let's away,' and away they flew like lightning. They had, however, sauntered so long in their road that they did not reach Ambleside before me, and I saw them go up to Matthew Harrison's house with their wallet upon the elder's shoulder, and creeping with a beggar's complaining foot."

These three poems, judged by any purely literary standard, are almost void of merit. They could find no place in a volume of Selections chosen for beauty and glamour of expression; they would even be called silly by many a critic competent to choose such a selection. But they are poetry in the making; they lead us by the way that the poet trod, and bring us at last to the *Ode*, or to the *Sonnet* composed on the beach near Calais, with quickened perceptions and an understanding that recognises how much of the stuff of human experience was distilled in these masterworks:—

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
The holy time is quiet as a Nun
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;
The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea:
Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
And doth with his eternal motion make
A sound like thunder—everlastingly.
Dear Child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
Thy nature is not therefore less divine:
Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
And worship'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
God being with thee when we know it not.

If Wordsworth was not at all times either easy or happy in his intercourse with children, he had better fortune with the humble people whom he met on the road or in the pastures. The same motives that sent him to school to the young led him, for many consecutive years, to observe and question men and women of a lowly station in society. They were not so shy as children, and were readier to discern and appreciate the wholly disinterested attitude of the questioner. He came to them, perhaps, not without illusions, but without a trace of the self-consciousness which so often shuts the gates of knowledge to the rich, or the well-born, or the much-educated man. He was ardently inquisitive, absolutely modest, and free from a thought of self-defence, so that he obtained the confidences which are readily given to a humane

upon the road. When once they see that persistence is useless, they cast off the suppliant manner and lose no time in returning to their interrupted play. The business of life is a troublesome piece of assumption, gladly thrown aside in favour of the joy of life. This moral, which is pointed by the poem, is absent from the *Journal*. The real beggars, as described by Dorothy Wordsworth, were more diligent in their profession. "Says the elder, 'Let's away,' and away they flew like lightning. They had, however, sauntered so long in their road that they did not reach Ambleside before me, and I saw them go up to Matthew Harrison's house with their wallet upon the elder's shoulder, and creeping with a beggar's complaining foot."

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And worship'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
God being with thee when we know it not.

If Wordsworth was not at all times either easy or happy in his intercourse with children, he had better fortune with the humble people whom he met on the road or in the pastures. The same motives that sent him to school to the young led him, for many consecutive years, to observe and question men and women of a lowly station in society. They were not so shy as children, and were readier to discern and appreciate the wholly disinterested attitude of the questioner. He came to them, perhaps, not without illusions, but without a trace of the self-consciousness which so often shuts the gates of knowledge to the rich, or the well-born, or the much-educated man. He was ardently inquisitive, absolutely modest, and free from a thought of self-defence, so that he obtained the confidences which are readily given to a humane

traveller of an inquiring turn of mind. His observation of the peasantry—if that word may be used without prejudice to designate all those who live on the land by their own labour—yielded him the best and finest part of his poetic harvest.

Here, he thought, among the peasantry, are none of the deceits of idle fashion, the social vanities and the intellectual pretensions that overlay the fundamental facts of life in a more ambitious society. His method of research was that of a chemical investigator; he wanted to isolate the elements of human life, and he therefore chose for his experiment the least complex forms of society known to him. His motives have been somewhat obscured by Coleridge's criticisms in the seventeenth chapter of the *Biographia Literaria*, where the question is reduced to a question of diction. Coleridge has no difficulty in showing that the language of rustic life is largely borrowed, through the popular agencies of education and religion, from the language used by scholars, philosophers, and poets; that it is not a separate primitive speech, but, when freed from provincialism and grossness, differs not at all, except by its limitations, from the language of any man of common sense, however educated or refined. But he had moved far from his earlier sympathy with Wordsworth by the time he wrote his criticism, and he seriously confuses the issues. The case

for the peasant's speech, he says, is not rendered more tenable by the addition of the words "in a state of excitement." "The nature of a man's words, when he is strongly affected by joy, grief, or anger, must necessarily depend on the number and quality of the general truths, conceptions, and images, and of the words expressing them, with which his mind had been previously stored." This is very true, and quite irrelevant. Wordsworth's allusion to "the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement" was no part of his theory of diction. Men and women in a state of excitement were chosen by him, as any one who reads his preface will see, not as teachers of language, but as unusually favourable subjects for the exhibition of "the primary laws of our nature." What he stated was a truth that may be illustrated from the works of any great poet in any language; it may be proved from *Peter Bell*, but it may still better be proved from the cry of Marlowe's dying king:—

Tell Isabel the Queen I looked not thus
When for her sake I ran at tilt in France,
And there unhorsed the Duke of Clerimont.

Doubtless Coleridge was right in some other parts of his contention. The dalesmen, he says truly, are not a peasantry, but an aristocracy; their society is a society governed by strict and proud

conventions; they are better educated and greater readers than men of equal rank elsewhere. He corrects some of Wordsworth's misconceptions in the light of a broader philosophy of language and society. But he touches the root of the matter only incidentally. A real and fundamental difference between himself and Wordsworth appears in his denial of Wordsworth's statement that from the objects with which the rustic hourly communicates "the best part of the language is derived." On the contrary, says Coleridge, "the best part of human language, properly so called, is derived from reflection on the acts of the mind itself. It is formed by a voluntary appropriation of fixed symbols to internal acts, to processes and results of imagination, the greater part of which have no place in the consciousness of uneducated man." Here, at least, is flat opposition. To Wordsworth the very names of the simplest things that are dear to the heart, with their tender associations, conveyed an infinitely more profound meaning than all the instrumental wealth, the abstract and general terms, of a highly developed and philosophical language. He tried to keep his reader "in the company of flesh and blood"; he wrote poems on the Naming of Places. Both disputants, perhaps, were right. Language has work to do; it is a necessary instrument of culture; and the poet who scorns its more elaborate develop-

ments is very much in the position of the farmer who will have nothing to do with the reaping-machine. Yet the sickle can reach humble patches and plots that are neglected by its rival; and it cuts closer.

The influence of a single great man, who must be listened to because he speaks nothing in vain, will sometimes darken counsel for ages. Coleridge's philosophic concern with questions of language gave a bias to later and meaner criticism of Wordsworth from which it has not yet recovered. There is another account of the reasons for Wordsworth's choice of humble and rustic life as the theme of his poetry, but it appeared thirty-three years later than the *Biographia*, and has been little consulted. It is to be found in the Thirteenth Book of the *Prelude*.

In his despondency at the ill consequences of the French Revolution, Wordsworth had turned away from the works of Man to seek and find comfort in the works of Nature. And Nature led him back, with more composed and surer feelings, to consider Man once more—not Man of the politicians, the statists, and the moralists, but the individual man, "the man whom we behold with our own eyes." The individual man, however, had already been found wanting; he was the dupe of passion, the victim of folly, frenzy, and presumption; and hence a question. How is it

that so few among mankind—one in ten thousand—exhibit mental power and genuine virtue? The ideal of the Revolution, the simple, good man, clear in mind and strong in act, is surely not fantastic; here and there the ideal is realised. Why is it not the rule? Is there anything in the natural constitution of man or in the natural laws that govern his life, anything in his daily needs and animal appetites which hinders and stunts? If not, then other hindrances are of little account. Wordsworth was resolved to reduce human life to its lowest terms, to see whether it is in itself a thing of worth. The men who pass their lives under a weight of labour and hardship, battling for a bare subsistence, would be able, he thought, to tell him more than all the theorists and economists. He took to the road, where, even now, a hundred years and more after his initiation, any poet may find wealth of human passion enough to furnish him with his stock-in-trade. In the lonely road, where every face met is a separate adventure, like the speaking of a ship at sea, he found "the books, the arts, the academes" which qualified him in his profession. Another memory of his childhood came back to him like a portent, the memory of an open road, winding up a hill, and lost to the eye against the sky-line, as if it were an invitation into space or a guide into eternity.

In Dorsetshire, at Alfoxden, and during his

early time at Grasmere he [illegible] experiences which made of him a prophet [illegible] inspired. After some years he lost his [illegible] fresh acquaintance, and in his later age by the general consent of his neighbours he was [illegible] very distant." Is this a thing to be lamented, and do the words that he spoke over the lesser Celandine apply to his own lot?—

> It doth not seek the cold:
> This neither is its courage nor its choice,
> But its necessity in being old.

Yet what would we have? The mind of man is frugal, and of the spendthrift feast of experience will take no more than may serve for its own nurture. In the plenteous years, while he was a prodigal's favourite, he gathered store enough to turn any man into a miser. The roads rewarded their disciple. "There I heard," he says,

> From mouths of men obscure and lowly, truths
> Replete with honour; sounds in unison
> With loftiest promises of good and fair.

He came to a sense of another world, a world governed by fixed laws, like the world of external Nature; in Man's essential character he found spiritual dignity, as in Nature he had found grace and power. The two thenceforward were one for him; the beatings of the heart of man were felt to

obey the same law that holds the stars in their courses. "It shall be my pride," he says,

That I have dared to tread this holy ground,
Speaking no dream, but things oracular.

Among the vagrants and beggars and pensioners who were his chosen subjects he found those qualities which gave Rome her empire in the ancient world, and those also which, in the mediæval world, drew whole peoples on pilgrimage. So, speaking only of what he saw "in the familiar circuit of his home," he saved poetry from that touch of unreality which comes from too prolonged and too deep an obeisance made to hearsay virtues, and brought it back to the miracles that transform the face of daily life.

Two or three examples must be chosen from Wordsworth's sketches of these lowly teachers, for in these descriptions he quietly achieves the work which he had gone about, with a flourish of trumpets and a deal of unremunerative industry, in the tale of *Peter Bell*. The Fourth Book of the *Prelude* closes with an account of a night adventure near Windermere. It was during his College vacation; Wordsworth had attended the annual regatta, and had stayed late at an evening entertainment. He had far to walk home, and on the road he met a ghost—the embodied Spirit of Solitude. It appeared to him

in the figure of a man, taller than the common stature, stiff, lank, and upright, companionless, with no dog or staff, leaning against a milestone, and looking ghastly in the moonlight. There was light enough to see that he was dressed like a soldier :—

From his lips, ere long,
Issued low muttered sounds, as if of pain
Or some uneasy thought; yet still his form
Kept the same awful steadiness—at his feet
His shadow lay, and moved not.

Wordsworth at last summoned up courage to address him. The figure, he says,

Rose, and with a lean and wasted arm
In measured gesture lifted to his head
Returned my salutation; then resumed
His station as before; and when I asked
His history, the veteran, in reply,
Was neither slow nor eager; but, unmoved,
And with a quiet uncomplaining voice,
A stately air of mild indifference,
He told in few plain words a soldier's tale—
That in the Tropic Islands he had served,
Whence he had landed scarcely three weeks past;
That on his landing he had been dismissed,
And now was travelling towards his native home.

He consented to go with the poet to seek for shelter, and they walked on together:—

Though weak his step and cautious, he appeared
To travel without pain, and I beheld,

With an astonishment but ill suppressed,
His ghostly figure moving at my side.

They talked for a time, and Wordsworth asked him questions concerning his military experiences:

He all the while was in demeanour calm,
Concise in answer; solemn and sublime
He might have seemed, but that in all he said
There was a strange half-absence, as of one
Knowing too well the importance of his theme,
But feeling it no longer. Our discourse
Soon ended, and together on we passed
In silence through a wood gloomy and still.
Up-turning, then, along an open field,
We reached a cottage.

Here shelter was asked and obtained for the soldier, and the poet entreated him that in future he would not linger in the public highway, but would ask for help when he needed it:—

At this reproof,
With the same ghastly mildness in his look,
He said, "My trust is in the God of Heaven,
And in the eye of him who passes me."

When they parted at the door, the soldier's voice in expressing his thanks showed, for the first time, a trace of feeling; and the poet, after looking back at the cottage and lingering near it for a while, went on his way, with quiet heart, to his own home.

The magic of this description is not wholly due to that romantic spirit of wonder which notices, for instance, the stillness of the soldier's shadow. There is a subtler element in it; the figure of the man is invested with an effect of romantic distance by Wordsworth's hesitating and delicate reverence for the personality of another. The dalesmen, said Coleridge, are an aristocracy; Wordsworth's treatment of them would have been suitable enough for royalty itself. There is a kind of bustling warm-heartedness which sometimes claims to speak in the name of democracy, as if the coarse man were the only fit representative of his fellow-creatures, or as if reserve were the selfish privilege of an aristocracy, to be broken down wherever it is found. These political terms, in truth, are beside the mark; Wordsworth has nothing to do with them. Democracy recognises the rights of man, and, for the most part, leaves it to every one to assert his own. But no system of society can secure for every one that courtly deference and that separate tender consideration with which the poet treated the humblest of his fellow-men.

Resolution and Independence, the poem that describes the interview with the old Leech-gatherer, is not an exact transcript from life. The meeting and the conversation took place in September 1800 on the road at Grasmere, a few hundred yards from Dove Cottage. Wordsworth [illegible]

the scene in order to show the old man at his work, and to set him among elemental powers akin to his majestic and indomitable spirit. For the rest, the record is true enough. The dejection, the sad fears and fancies that haunted the poet's thoughts, were no invention. In the year 1800 his means of subsistence were nearing an end; he had devoted himself diligently to poetry without winning substantial recognition, and a visit from his brother John, who followed a practical profession, had perhaps suggested to him the thought of self-reproach :—

My whole life I have lived in pleasant thought,
As if life's business were a summer mood;
As if all needful things would come unsought
To genial faith, still rich in genial good;
But how can He expect that others should
Build for him, sow for him, and at his call
Love him, who for himself will take no heed at all?

This is the common lot of poets, he thought; they are glad and confident in their youth, but it all leads to poverty and misery and madness. And then, as if by "peculiar grace, a leading from above, a something given," there appears to him the minister of consolation :—

Beside a pool bare to the eye of heaven,
I saw a Man before me unawares:
The oldest man he seemed that ever wore grey hairs.

Half in absence of mind, still troubled by his own meditations, the poet questions him as to his occupation, and learns that he gains a livelihood by roaming the moors and gathering leeches from the ponds. They are much scarcer, the old man says, than they used to be :—

> Yet still I persevere, and find them where I may.

Then, with cheerful indifference, he goes on to speak of other matters, and the poet takes shame to himself for his own weakness.

That is the whole dramatic action of this wonderful poem. The management of it shows Wordsworth at his greatest. He had not loved and studied Nature in vain. The man is compared to certain natural appearances which have something of mystery and dignity about them—to a huge boulder, deposited, none knows how, on a hill-top—to a slow-moving cloud, seen from afar, untroubled by the tumult of the winds—to a sea-beast that has crawled out of its native element to taste the strange warmth of the sun. Before he delivers his message the Leech-gatherer is felt to be "a man from some far region sent." And when he has delivered his message, the old pauper on the lonely moor has won a place beside the great heroic figures of history, or epic, or drama.

Some changes were made in the text of the poem, most of them for the worse, out of deference

to Coleridge's criticisms. One very characteristic stanza was omitted :—

My course I stopped as soon as I espied
The Old Man in that naked wilderness :
Close by a Pond, upon the further side,
He stood alone : a minute's space I guess
I watched him, he continuing motionless :
To the Pool's further margin then I drew ;
He being all the while before me in full view.

This well illustrates that certain "matter-of-factness" which Coleridge blamed. But has it no poetic value here? Is it not spoken exactly as a witness would speak who is about to tell how he saw a murder done or a life saved? Does it not prepare the reader for great doings? And, finally, is he disappointed?

Enough of this ever-recurring argument. It is a good thing that Wordsworth was not urged by his friend to change the profession of the Leech-gatherer and to make of him a Collector of Humming-birds. The humming-birds, it is true, would have had to be brought into Britain for the purpose. But so had the Blind Boy's Indian shell ; and brought it was.

The *Old Cumberland Beggar* is, like the Leech-gatherer, a commissioner from Heaven, a kind of good angel, calling forth, wherever he passes, acts of human kindness, pity, and love. He is far too

old and frail to do anything for his living. But is he therefore useless?

'Tis Nature's law
That none, the meanest of created things,
Or forms created the most vile and brute,
The dullest or most noxious, should exist
Divorced from good—a spirit and pulse of good,
A life and soul, to every mode of being
Inseparably linked.

Much more is the innocent and helpless life of the old man a means of good. The youngest and the most thoughtless pay respect to his feebleness. He keeps unselfishness alive and continues traditions of charity. The sight of him serves as a silent monitor to the prosperous, the robust, and the gay, touching them to thought and to a keener sense of thankfulness for what they enjoy. And all this is illustrated by Wordsworth in carefully detailed incidents and pictures, so that the weary steps of the solitary beggar, as he goes on his rounds, have the dramatic value of the song of the girl in Browning's *Pippa Passes*. The same effect is obtained, without any operatic machinery or any departure from the daily experiences of village life.

Sketches like these make it easier to understand Wordsworth's account of the way by which he was led to sympathy with humanity. Nature, as he tells in the *Prelude*, held for long an exclusive place in his affections. When the feeling for

humanity was aroused in him by suffering, Man was still subordinate to Nature, in this sense, that he was always conceived in a larger setting, exhibited in close relations with a greater whole, and played around by the emotions that it begets. From beginning to end Wordsworth could not bring himself to regard the network of human relationships as a thing to be studied for its own sake. In crowded societies of men he found

> the same perpetual whirl
> Of trivial objects melted and reduced
> To one identity, by differences
> That have no law, no meaning, and no end.

The clamour and confusion of St. Bartholomew's Fair seemed to him an epitome of the great City of London; it distracted the senses with its multitudinous solicitations, and left no work for the imagination to do. Like a huge hall for the display of machinery, a great city exhibits a vast multiplicity of objects, each designed only for the end which it is fulfilling. In such a spectacle, says Wordsworth, we see

> A work completed to our hands, which lays,
> If any spectacle on earth can do,
> The whole creative powers of man asleep!

It acted on him like an opiate; whereas the lonely glen or bare hill excited his imagination and quickened his thought. In the Eighth Book of

the *Prelude* he describes how his imagination was sometimes touched by the sights of London, but touched in a familiar mode. The vast city became the dwelling-place of mystic presences; the living inhabitants were like a vague sea over which the ghosts of ancient passions fluttered and brooded.

But solitary man, under the spreading sky, in living contact with the earth, and governed by the simple, stern necessities of his daily out-door existence, was conceived by Wordsworth with a depth of insight and a sympathy that no other poet has achieved. The distinction between Man and Nature, it has often been observed, is a fallacious distinction, not warranted by science. Man, as any one of the race who has studied Science can explain, is a part of Nature, not a separate kingdom. But how many can bring themselves to feel this—to feel it habitually and sincerely in all human affairs? The pride of knowledge may work a more complete alienation between Man and Nature than ever was effected by ignorance and superstition. It is by a great imaginative gift that Wordsworth sees man in his surroundings; his men are spirits of the Earth, wrought upon by the elements from which they are compounded. Hence in his descriptions of humanity there is a kind of magic purity; the influences of earth and sky are everywhere felt in human feature and character. The affinity between Man and Nature expresses itself

in a hundred incidental comparisons. The poet when he sees the daffodils is wandering "lonely as a cloud"; when he is composing his verses,

> He murmurs near the running brooks
> A music sweeter than their own.

Is he shy and averse from society,—this also is a quality of Nature:

> He is retired as noon-tide dew
> Or fountain in a noon-day grove;
> And you must love him, ere to you
> He will seem worthy of your love.

And not only in these gentler qualities is the impress of Nature felt. Peter Bell also is a being compounded of the elements; before he was the convert of Nature he was her child:—

> And you might see
> At once, that Peter Bell and she
> Had often been together.
>
> A savage wildness round him hung
> As of a dweller out of doors;
> In his whole figure and his mien
> A savage character was seen
> Of mountains and of dreary moors.
> . . . . .
>
> There was a hardness in his cheek,
> There was a hardness in his eye,
> As if the man had fixed his face,

> In many a solitary place,
> Against the wind and open sky!

Matthew, the village schoolmaster, at rest after his cares and joys, is "silent as a standing pool"; and the Ancient Mariner, in the description which Wordsworth contributed to his story, is

> Long, and lank, and brown,
> As is the ribbed sea-sand.

The simple and cheerful peasant who guides the timber wain, in the Seventh Book of the *Excursion*, is described by the like elemental similitudes:—

> Grey locks profusely round his temples hung
> In clustering curls, like ivy, which the bite
> Of winter cannot thin; the fresh air lodged
> Within his cheek, as light within a cloud.

And in the Sixth Book it is told how, when her child died and she had nothing to live for,

> the green stalk of Ellen's life was snapped,
> And the flower drooped; as every eye could see
> It hung its head in mortal languishment.

All the qualities and appearances of Nature thus find their counterpart in Man—the child who is bone of her bone, and who inherits her form and favour.

This is not all; the imaginative fusion of Nature and Man was with Wordsworth so complete that he came to see a close affinity between the ordi-

nances of Nature and the highest human virtues. The moral law, the law of love, and duty, and sacrifice, which is sometimes made into a barrier between Man and the rest of creation—this also, for Wordsworth, is the law of Nature. "Wherever life and sense are given by God," there he found love. The poem *Fidelity* is a tribute to the dog that watched for three months by its master's body in the wildest recesses of Helvellyn:—

> How nourished here through such long time
> He knows, who gave that love sublime;
> And gave that strength of feeling, great
> Above all human estimate!

It is not in a spirit of idle wonder at a supernatural reach of virtue that Wordsworth pays his tribute; he is reluctant to have to do with supernatural occurrences or with supernatural morality. To love and to be strong, this is the fulfilling of the law, for beast and man. And if the forces of Nature are hard and pitiless servants of her command, force for force they may be matched, and, though not resisted, yet subdued to itself by a power as stern as they, the secret power of the soul. Shall the stars keep their courses, and shall man not keep his faith? The moral nature of man is not exhibited by Wordsworth in direct conflict with the hard laws of the material universe. The hardness of

these laws gives to Man his most magnificent opportunities, and tests the highest of his resources; he is a worker in iron. The poet neither rebels nor protests against Fate, and it is this, perhaps, which leads a critic, already quoted, to deny to him "the sense of Fate—of the inexorable sequences of things, of the terrible chain that so often binds an awful end to some slight and trivial beginning." If Wordsworth had anticipated such an objection he could not have undermined it and shattered it more completely than by writing the *White Doe of Rylstone, or the Fate of the Nortons* In that poem he summons all the powers of grief and anguish to do their worst on a single devoted soul. They spring to deliver their assault suddenly, out of a midsummer of peace and happiness. The emblematic banner, fashioned by Emily Norton at her father's command, becomes an instrument of her direst woe. The hammer-blows of Fate follow one another in quick succession; none is spared and none softened. "Everything," says Wordsworth, "that is attempted by the principal personages in 'The White Doe' fails, so far as its object is external and substantial. So far as it is moral and spiritual it succeeds." But what an awe-inspiring majesty of courage it is that faces such a success! The inevitable doom that falls on Richard Norton and his sons is foreseen and foretold to Emily by her brother Francis, who bids her

take comfort in the thought that she is permitted to go with him to meet it, her eyes unblinded and her heart undeluded :—

> Hope nothing, I repeat, for we
> Are doomed to perish utterly:
> 'Tis meet that thou with me divide
> The thought while I am by thy side,
> Acknowledging a grace in this,
> A comfort in the dark abyss.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Weep, if that aid thee; but depend
> Upon no aid of outward friend;
> Espouse thy doom at once, and cleave
> To fortitude without reprieve.

And when the doom has fallen, when the father and the sons who fought with him have been tried for treason and have suffered an ignominious death, when Francis, the last and dearest of her brothers, attempting to bring the banner back to Bolton Abbey, has been overtaken and slain, and Emily is left alone with her fate, what shelter does the poet, unflinching to the end, provide for her?

> What mighty forest in its gloom
> Enfolds her?—is a rifted tomb
> Within the wilderness her seat?
> Some island which the wild waves beat—
> Is that the Sufferer's last retreat?
> Or some aspiring rock, that shrouds
> Its perilous front in mists and clouds?

High-climbing rock, low sunless dale,
Sea, desert, what do these avail?
Oh take her anguish and her fears
Into a deep recess of years!

She acts out her part; she suffers, and is strong and worthy of the grace of God; and so, even in life, is sainted, raised by the force of sorrow itself beyond the reach of any further disturbance of the soul:—

The mighty sorrow hath been borne,
And she is thoroughly forlorn:
Her soul doth in itself stand fast,
Sustained by memory of the past
And strength of Reason; held above
The infirmities of mortal love;
Undaunted, lofty, calm, and stable,
And awfully impenetrable.

There is no lack here of the sense of Fate. That the poet should thus address himself calmly to scale these dizzy cliffs of anguish, where the mortal senses reel, might almost seem too presumptuous an attempt for the powers of the human imagination. Wordsworth would never have dared it had not his own feelings on the death of his brother John given him guidance in the ascent. And the White Doe, which wanders through the poem, a gracious presence, is the embodiment of the comfort that he found in the continued gentle breathings of Nature and in the deep well-springs of his own soul.

The *Character of the Happy Warrior* owes something to the same inspiration, and is of a like temper. The warrior, by his profession, is brought into daily contact with the grimmest of facts and laws; it is his duty to make them subservient to the law for which he stands. He is one

Who, doomed to go in company with Pain,
And Fear, and Bloodshed, miserable train!
Turns his necessity to glorious gain;
In face of these doth exercise a power
Which is our human nature's highest dower;
Controls them and subdues, transmutes, bereaves
Of their bad influence, and their good receives:
By objects, which might force the soul to abate
Her feeling, rendered more compassionate;
Is placable—because occasions rise
So often that demand such sacrifice;
More skilful in self-knowledge, even more pure,
As tempted more; more able to endure,
As more exposed to suffering and distress;
Thence, also, more alive to tenderness.

It was a strange fortune, some think, that made Wordsworth the best Laureate of the warrior So fixed is the misconception of his character and of his poetry that the very existence of this, his great tribute to the noblest of professions, is held to require explanation. But, in truth, had he followed his early leanings and taken the Army for his calling, he would have been an incomparable soldier. The *White Doe* is a warrior poem;

greater, perhaps, than the poem explicitly devoted to the ideal soldier, as the virtues that it enshrines are rarer and more difficult. The Happy Warrior is not compelled throughout the whole of a long life to "stand and wait"; the crisis of action brings him the consummation of his happiness. He is a gentle and generous spirit,

> Whose powers shed round him in the common strife,
> Or mild concerns of ordinary life,
> A constant influence, a peculiar grace;
> But who, if he be called upon to face
> Some awful moment to which Heaven has joined
> Great issues, good or bad for human kind,
> Is happy as a Lover; and attired
> With sudden brightness, like a Man inspired;
> And through the heat of conflict keeps the law
> In calmness made, and sees what he foresaw.

The two poems have much in common; the virtue of the soldier, as of the lady, lies not in opposing ruthless necessity, but in accepting it, and aiming at a victory that may be won when "prayers for this cause or for that" have been abandoned. And in both poems the happiness of clear vision, which enables man to be still the giver, not the stunned victim of a theft, is set high among human privileges.

The *Ode to Duty*, written earlier than these two poems, is in some sort an induction to them. It is in eternal law that humanity finds consolation

and support, and life and joy. From early childhood Wordsworth, as he tells in the *Prelude*, had chiefly esteemed that love and that beauty which have in them an element of severity and terror. He returned to them, after a holiday of genial impulse, to find them greater and more commanding than before. The beauty that he reveals, more fully than other poets, is the beauty of the rocks; on this unshaken ground all graces that are *not illusion must build. Flowers, and laughter, and fragrance—all that plays on the surface and fades in the air*—are the offspring of the same unalterable law which disciplines the stars in their squadrons, and which, in human hearts, is the law of sanity and order, of faith and of peace.

CHAPTER VI

ILLUMINATION

NATURE and human life, then, together make up a book of wonder and power, composed in a strange language, unlike the speech that men use for the business of life, and written in unknown characters. The book has never been read, but glimpses of its meaning are obtainable by those who pore over it lovingly and long, and who do not despise small aids and chance suggestions towards its interpretation The poet makes it the business of his life to read at least some part of it; and we have seen him at work, trying this way and that, gazing at the pages so fixedly that he stamps them, down to the minutest detail, on his memory, testing likely theories of the cipher, listening with rapt attention to the casual comments of those innocent and idle spirits who, seeking no hidden meaning, find no difficulty in the book, but turn over its pages for pure delight, and notice, from time to time, features of the script that have escaped the eye of

more methodical observers. The last resource of the poet still remains to him. The little that he has been able to read comes to him not as the conclusion of a laboured and triumphant series of syllogisms, but in sudden flashes of intelligence, often lost before they can be directed to the dark places. Whence are these lights that spring up in the mind and flicker and die? Does the mind hold the secret after all, and has it bewildered itself chiefly by too servile an attention to outward things? It was to answer these questions that Wordsworth turned his gaze inward and attempted to explore the recesses of his own mind.

This was held by himself to be, and was indeed, the most significant part of his work. He found the mind vast and immeasurable and shadowy; beyond the empyrean it was there, and it stretched under the lowest reaches of the abyss. This sense of infinity filled him with awe:—

> Not Chaos, not
> The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,
> Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
> By help of dreams—can breed such fear and awe
> As fall upon us often when we look
> Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man—
> My haunt, and the main region of my song.

His own mind, the mind of Man, contained all things in itself, if only it could be explored. To

acquaint himself with "the individual Mind that keeps her own inviolate retirement" became the great purpose of his quest. Success in this quest is the true marriage of Cupid and Psyche, figured in the loveliest fable of the Ancients; all the intermediate wanderings of the soul are tasks and trials imposed by the jealousy of divorcing powers.

Without other apparatus than introspection and the observation of his fellows, Wordsworth became a psychologist. He concerned himself especially, as we have seen, with those moments of suddenly awakened feeling when something comes to the mind in a flash. There is a regular and customary perspective imposed by the mind upon the world of objects perceived. But these objects, whether they be sensations, or perceptions, or emotions, do not invariably submit to the imposition. They assert their independence in movements that defy control. The humblest of them, on no assignable provocation, will put on the demeanour of a tyrant. In social relations it is familiar to everyone how a word or a gesture of no particular import will sometimes recur to the mind with as much insistence and self-importance as if it were the sentence or the nod of a presiding judge. And so with the feelings; they will not accept their ceremonial status; they break loose from their allotted places and subvert the natural order of expectation :—

I drew my bride, beneath the moon,
Across my threshold; happy hour!
But, ah, the walk that afternoon,
We saw the water-flags in flower!

To Wordsworth these insurgent movements seemed worth the watching, for they give a clue to what is in progress in the depths below. It is this that he intends when he speaks of presenting ordinary things to the mind in an unusual aspect, and of making the incidents and situations of common life interesting by tracing in them "the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement." In the unprepared and unforeseen illumination of the dark recesses, which comes and is gone, he found the gĕnesis of poetry.

The inexplicable and almost incredible quickness of movement which is produced in the mind by the presence of a strong emotion seemed favourable to these appearances. Yet he gave no unique or remarkable importance, in this regard, to the passion of love. Other poets, without number, have sung the praises of love the revealer:—

Love wakes men, once a lifetime each;
They lift their heavy lids, and look;
And, lo, what one sweet page can teach
They read with joy, then shut the book.

The obvious explanation that Wordsworth, like

Francis Bacon, and unlike Bacon's greater contemporary, held love to be a weak passion, is untrue. Rather he held it to be too strong and disorderly, too little intellectual in its quickening power, to be trusted as an illuminant. In the story of *Vaudracour and Julia* he tells how the world was transformed for Vaudracour in the rapture of his love:—

> Earth breathed in one great presence of the spring;
> Life turned the meanest of her implements,
> Before his eyes, to price above all gold;
> The house she dwelt in was a sainted shrine;
> Her chamber-window did surpass in glory
> The portals of the dawn; all paradise
> Could, by the simple opening of a door,
> Let itself in upon him.

Yet this change is regarded as a blessed deceit, the work of fancy sporting desperately with minds, and is valued by Wordsworth only as

> an earnest given
> By ready nature for a life of love,
> For endless constancy, and placid truth.

He passes lightly, therefore, over the raptures of the pair, a theme the like of which, as he observes, has been treated by many other poets, and devotes his single love-tale to the tragic miseries and long pitiful endurance of the separated lovers. The same view of the passion of love gives its calm

strength and beauty to the poem of *Laodamia*. Under the influence of this passion, according to Wordsworth, men's minds are enslaved to the high purposes of Nature; the transports of the lover have none of the revealing virtue of those disinterested moments which teach us

> to what point, and how,
> The mind is lord and master—outward sense
> The obedient servant of her will.

Many of his poems owe their origin to a curious study of these significant moments when the mind, acting spontaneously and without forethought, reads new values into life and experience. It would be tedious to attempt exhaustive illustration. Without these self-directing movements of the mind, which take a man at unawares and leave him in the position of an amazed watcher, the huddled chaos of experience would have no power save to confuse and deaden the receptive faculties. Curiously and intently Wordsworth watched the rise of unexplained impulses and feelings in his own mind and in the minds of others. In *Star-Gazers* he describes the small crowd gathered in Leicester Square round a showman who, for a small fee, shows them the moon through his telescope. One after another they pay their money and look, and then go away slack and dejected, as if they felt no satisfaction from the thing they have

seen. What, thinks the poet as he watches them, can be the meaning of this feeling of disappointment? They had been eager enough to see, each impatiently and enviously waiting for his turn. Is the instrument a poor one? Is the moon, more exactly seen, less delightful than the earth? Is no joy possible in a thing that does not interest the affections? Are the demands of the imagination insatiable? Is it the return from the long journey out of herself that saddens the soul with a sense of her narrow bounds? Have the spectators, perhaps, souls incapable of rising to the majesty of the spectacle? Or, lastly, is this a sight which casts down human pride and solemnises the mind with earnest thought and a grave and deep happiness? So the poet passes from question to question, sure only that if he could read these minds aright he would learn something more of human nature and human destiny.

Often it is his own mind that he surprises at its work of bringing order into experience, and, under the influence of some obscure emotion, selecting among a thousand objects indifferently presented. These preferences, he holds, are not caprices of the idle fancy; they are portents and reminiscences. In two sonnets he describes himself watching a wide expanse of the sea, sprinkled all over with ships. One ship among them engages all his attention :—

This Ship was nought to me, nor I to her,
Yet I pursued her with a Lover's look;
This Ship to all the rest did I prefer:
When will she turn, and whither?

What land or haven is she bound for as she puts forth thus in fresh and joyous array? And then there crosses his mind a foreboding of

doubt, and something dark,
Of the old Sea some reverential fear.

He offers no argument, but is content to record the feeling as simply as it arose in his mind.

These vigils of contemplation were the chief sources of his poetry. They were familiar to him from boyhood. In a letter written to Coleridge's periodical, the *Friend*, he describes how the reason works by thought through feeling, and, to illustrate his point, narrates an experience of childhood:—

There never perhaps existed a school-boy who, having, when he retired to rest, carelessly blown out his candle, and having chanced to notice, as he lay upon his bed in the ensuing darkness, the sullen light which had survived the extinguished flame, did not, at some time or other, watch that light as if his mind were bound to it by a spell. It fades and revives, gathers to a point, seems as if it would go out in a moment, again recovers its strength, nay, becomes brighter than before; it continues to shine with an endurance which, in its apparent weakness, is a mystery; it protracts its existence so long, clinging to the power which supports it, that the observer,

who had lain down in his bed so easy-minded, becomes sad and melancholy; his sympathies are touched; it is to him an intimation and an image of departing human life; the thought comes nearer to him; it is the life of a venerated parent, of a beloved brother or sister, or of an aged domestic, who are gone to the grave, or whose destiny it soon may be thus to linger, thus to hang upon the last point of mortal existence, thus finally to depart and be seen no more. This is nature teaching seriously and sweetly through the affections, melting the heart, and, through that instinct of tenderness, developing the understanding.

Another of these "strange fits of passion" is described in the poems inspired by Lucy; the immediate occasion is not a dying candle, but the setting of the moon. The lover is riding in the evening to visit his love, and as he approaches her cottage the moon that lights him to it sinks in appearance nearer and nearer to the cottage roof.

> My horse moved on; hoof after hoof
> He raised, and never stopped:
> When down beneath the cottage roof,
> At once, the bright moon dropped.
>
> What fond and wayward thoughts will slide
> Into a Lover's head!
> "O mercy!" to myself I cried,
> "If Lucy should be dead!"

But this, some one may say, is superstition, although it is superstition only half seriously held.

There could not be a greater mistake. Wordsworth is the least superstitious of poets. In his exploration of the world of the mind he found this strong tendency to interpret events by the light of the emotions. He did not believe that the interpretation was necessarily or usually valid. He believed in the existence of the tendency, and held that its very existence is a fact to be reckoned with. He was far now from the pedantic rationalism of Godwin. All that he had seen in what is called the known world had been revealed to him by his emotions—by admiration, and fear, and hope, and love. In these emotions he found the secret and spring of man's life—that is, of his existence. When, therefore, they arise mysteriously in the mind he was not prepared to call them idle and unmeaning because no rational cause, as the phrase goes, was assignable to them. His wide imagination, which refused to recognise the arbitrary boundary set between Nature and Man, sought for correspondences everywhere. The stars are kept in their places by the law of duty; the humblest fears and hopes of man tenant the same universe as the stars, and move to the same music. He did not transgress the modesty of human science or poorly and fantastically tether symbolic meanings to individual objects. He invented no language of flowers. A flower, in its place, as it grew, was more to him than any symbol; it was

a part of the eternal order, and, if it could be understood, a key to the whole. As he expresses it in the *Primrose of the Rock*:—

The flowers, still faithful to the stems,
  Their fellowship renew;
The stems are faithful to the root,
  That worketh out of view;
And to the rock the root adheres
  In every fibre true.

Close clings to earth the living rock,
  Though threatening still to fall;
The earth is constant to her sphere;
  And God upholds them all:
So blooms this lonely Plant, nor dreads
  Her annual funeral.

Running through all Wordsworth's poetry this is the deepest strain. While he limits himself to expressing a sense of the unbroken chain that binds the least things to the greatest in the outward world, he may be called philosophical. When he goes farther, and finds in the instincts and presentiments and impulses of the heart and mind of man movements that obey the same law, low-breathed messages from a hidden source, he is called mystical. Neither does he violate science here; he pins his faith to no particular code, but he refuses to isolate and neglect one whole world of experience only because it cannot be exactly interpreted, and, by certain "busy

foes to good," has been used as a refuge and warrant for their baser thoughts and cravings.

It is this deep imaginative sense of unity in things, of real correspondences and connections working throughout the universe of perception and thought, which gives profundity to Wordsworth's treatment of Nature. His imagination is essentially scientific, and quite unlike the fancy that decorates and falsifies fact to gratify an idle mind with a sense of neatness and ingenuity. The witty poets of an earlier generation found "emblems" everywhere in Nature, each with its exact application to the moral life of man. These emblems have always been serviceable to the preacher, who brings his truth ready-made, and seeks in Nature for incidents and objects to supply ingenious parallels. It is the cleverness of the application which is really esteemed, and moralists very early discovered that little or nothing is lost if the illustrative statements be untrue. The phœnix and the unicorn can be employed for purposes of edification as readily as the lion and the lamb. But one who goes to Nature humbly, as Wordsworth went, to learn new lessons from her, not to seek a factitious support for his own dogma, cares only for the fact, and finds no value in these logical diversions. Parables from Nature are rarely used by Wordsworth; his verse

> is dedicate to Nature's self,
> And things that teach as Nature teaches.

When he takes an illustration from the life of Nature, the facts are exactly observed, and are used to point a moral of a subtle kind. Thus, in the Fifth Book of the *Prelude*, praising the happy freedom which allowed him in youth to read any books that pleased his appetite, he takes a moral from the farmyard :—

Behold the parent hen among her brood,
Though fledged and feathered, and well pleased to part
And straggle from her presence, still a brood,
And she herself from the maternal bond
Still undischarged ; yet doth she little more
Than move with them in tenderness and love,
A centre to the circle which they make ;
And now and then, alike from need of theirs
And call of her own natural appetites,
She scratches, ransacks up the earth for food,
Which they partake at pleasure.

This approaches near to homiletic, yet it is something more than a mere illustration ; it is a study of an educational method warranted by Nature. A parallel with more of beauty and profundity occurs in the Twelfth Book, where he sends man to school to the winds and the streams, the waves and the woods :—

Ye motions of delight, that haunt the sides
Of the green hills ; ye breezes and soft airs,
Whose subtle intercourse with breathing flowers,
Feelingly watched, might teach Man's haughty race
How without injury to take, to give

Without offence; ye who, as if to show
The wondrous influence of power gently used,
Bend the complying heads of lordly pines,
And, with a touch, shift the stupendous clouds
Through the whole compass of the sky; ye brooks,
Muttering along the stones, a busy noise
By day, a quiet sound in silent night;
Ye waves, that out of the great deep steal forth
In a calm hour to kiss the pebbly shore,
Not mute, and then retire, fearing no storm;
And you, ye groves, whose ministry it is
To interpose the covert of your shades,
Even as a sleep, between the heart of man
And outward troubles, between man himself,
Not seldom, and his own uneasy heart:
Oh! that I had a music and a voice
Harmonious as your own, that I might tell
What ye have done for me.

This contains the whole doctrine of Wordsworth on the lessons of Nature; if it is didactic, it teaches not by forced parallel but by perceived identity. Man—to instance only the lesson from the winds—is not the sole giver; there are gifts, greater than any in his power, given daily without offence, and taken without injury. His gifts, too, if he could put off the little selfish attitudes of a conscious benefactor, might be as free and as joyful as the living air.

The distinction between the Fancy and the Imagination, so often set forth by Coleridge, is admirably exemplified by Wordsworth. He never

confuses the two faculties, never passes unwittingly from the one form of energy to the other. The human mind is playful, and will not be denied its sportive indulgences. Yet Fancy claims a comparatively small share in his works; "Nature's secondary grace," as he calls it,—

> The charm more superficial that attends
> Her works, as they present to Fancy's choice
> Apt illustrations of the moral world,
> Caught at a glance, or traced with curious pain,—

is barely touched upon in his greater poems, and never without the clearest indication of its trivial origin and office.

As might be expected, it follows from this that the moral reflections which conclude some of Wordsworth's shorter poems are quite unlike the stale, trite aphorisms of the didactic school of poetry. Wordsworth's morals, so to call them, are discoveries made by a vital sympathy which searches deep into the heart of things. They must be pondered long to be understood. In *Simon Lee* the profuse thankfulness of the old man for the slight service that was rendered to him moves the poet to this reflection—

> I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds
> With coldness still returning;
> Alas! the gratitude of men
> Hath oftener left me mourning.

In the *Small Celandine* the fate of the flower sets the poet thinking on the kindred human lot :—

> O Man, that from thy fair and shining youth
> Age might but take the things Youth needed not!

Matthew, the village schoolmaster, describes how, after the death of his daughter, he met a beautiful child "as happy as a wave that dances on the sea," and felt joy in the sight, followed by a pang of reflection :—

> There came from me a sigh of pain
> Which I could ill confine;
> I looked at her, and looked again:
> And did not wish her mine!

And the same profound teacher moralises thus, in the poem called the *Fountain*, on the life of man :—

> My eyes are dim with childish tears,
> My heart is idly stirred,
> For the same sound is in my ears
> Which in those days I heard.
>
> Thus fares it still in our decay:
> And yet the wiser mind
> Mourns less for what age takes away
> Than what it leaves behind.

These are the reflections of one who has studied the mind of man as reverently and patiently as the scientific observer studies the works of Nature.

They are strange and surprising, as all discoveries are surprising, and are expressed with no homiletic intent, but in a spirit of wonder and awe. It is not from the shallows swept by a thousand nets that these mysterious findings come; they tell of a depth "where fathom-line could never touch the ground," a depth where also there is life.

Whoever, then, desires to read Wordsworth aright must not look for proverbs, or maxims, or any of those condensed and generalised statements whereby mankind seeks to preserve experience in a form suitable for practical application. Nor must he look for a second sense. This poet is a true visionary, and deals not in allegories or dreams. The allegory is useful only for a scheme of thought which recognises two worlds, both known, and connected by certain curious likenesses and analogies. But what of the mass of sense-impressions and feelings which work upon the mind and heart and yet cannot be harnessed to metaphor, or ranged in symmetrical pairs with the aspirations of the soul of man? Have these no inherent significance and value? It is the mark of the mystic that he never despises sense, never uses it as a means to an end, a stepping-stone to be spurned when he has raised himself higher. He does not look beyond this world, but gazes intently on what is presented to him, and, if his quest fail, looks still nearer and closer. In the earth under

his boot-soles, in the garments that cling closest to him, and, if not there, in the beatings of his heart, he tries to find the secret. Heaven is not for him a far place, nor eternity a long time. Here or nowhere, now or never, the soul of all things is to be found.

Wordsworth has some wonderfully vivid descriptions of the dreams that came to him, waking or asleep. In the Fifth Book of the *Prelude* he narrates the dream of the Bedouin Arab, mounted on a dromedary, who showed him two books. One of them, which the Arab said was Euclid's *Elements*, was indeed a stone, but was accepted by the dreamer, as impossible things are accepted in dreams, for a book. The other, a thing of more worth, was a shell, delicate in shape and resplendent in colour, which the Arab bade him hold to his ear. He obeyed, and heard a loud prophecy of the destruction of the world. Then the Arab rode away over the desert, taking the books with him, to bury them. The dreamer followed, and begged in vain to be allowed to accompany him. As he pursues, they are chased by a deluge of the waters of the deep flowing in upon them, and the dreamer awakes. It is easy to detect in this dream a transformation of Wordsworth's waking thoughts concerning Science and Poetry. A similar origin may be assigned to the waking dream, or reverie, which came to him on Salisbury

Plain, when he seemed to see a company of long-bearded Druids ministering at a flaming altar and sacrificing cages full of living men. The past, as he conceived it, was embodied before his eyes by the intentness of his meditative energy.

The virtue of such dreams and apparitions is derived from those fuller activities of the waking mind which dreams reflect and distort. Wordsworth's true visions, far more solemn and moving than these, occurred in moments of high-wrought feeling, and presented to him, without falsification, things as they are. There are certain vital memories, as he explains in the *Prelude*, which shape our lives, we scarce know how, and become a part of us, usurping the office of the soul. They bring power with them, and communicate it, so that the soul, while she cleaves to them in her low and faint moods, can raise and revive herself by their aid. They seem to come to us from without, yet they are, in truth, the creatures of the soul, her children, loyal to her, and watchful of her welfare. Two of these are fully described by Wordsworth in the Twelfth Book of the *Prelude*, and they must be given in his own language.

One Christmas-time,
On the glad eve of its dear holidays,
Feverish, and tired, and restless, I went forth
Into the fields, impatient for the sight
Of those led palfreys that should bear us home;

My brothers and myself. There rose a crag,
That, from the meeting-point of two highways
Ascending, overlooked them both, far stretched;
Thither, uncertain on which road to fix
My expectation, thither I repaired,
Scout-like, and gained the summit; 'twas a day
Tempestuous, dark, and wild, and on the grass
I sate half-sheltered by a naked wall;
Upon my right hand couched a single sheep,
Upon my left a blasted hawthorn stood;
With those companions at my side, I watched,
Straining my eyes intensely, as the mist
Gave intermitting prospect of the copse
And plain beneath. Ere we to school returned,—
That dreary time,—ere we had been ten days
Sojourners in my father's house, he died;
And I and my three brothers, orphans then,
Followed his body to the grave. The event,
With all the sorrow that it brought, appeared
A chastisement; and when I called to mind
That day so lately past, when from the crag
I looked in such anxiety of hope;
With trite reflections of morality,
Yet in the deepest passion, I bowed low
To God, Who thus corrected my desires;
And, afterwards, the wind and sleety rain,
And all the business of the elements,
The single sheep, and the one blasted tree,
And the bleak music from that old stone wall,
The noise of wood and water, and the mist
That on the line of each of those two roads
Advanced in such indisputable shapes;
All these were kindred spectacles and sounds
To which I oft repaired, and thence would drink,
As at a fountain.

The revelation made to the pure in heart does not fulfil their desires; it corrects them. Wordsworth, who prayed for "more wise desires," found comfort in the sternness of God's ministers, the wind, and the rain, and the mist, and solitude, and sorrow, and death. He sought none of those sheltered Paradises which the weaker mind of man builds as an asylum for its defeated cravings—Paradises of indulgence and relaxation; he knew that there is no comfort in weakness. Only those who have tasted an exquisite joy, said Keats, can feel the power of sadness. Only those who have opened their eyes on the world as it is, and have put away selfish longings that they may see the clearer, can feel the radiance of happiness. But it is idle to try to express Wordsworth's teaching in sentences like these; it is the power of seeing and feeling that he quickens. Here is his other vision:—

I remember well,
That once, while yet my inexperienced hand
Could scarcely hold a bridle, with proud hopes
I mounted, and we journeyed towards the hills:
An ancient servant of my father's house
Was with me, my encourager and guide:
We had not travelled long, ere some mischance
Disjoined me from my comrade; and, through fear
Dismounting, down the rough and stony moor
I led my horse, and, stumbling on, at length
Came to a bottom, where in former times
A murderer had been hung in iron chains.

The gibbet-mast had mouldered down, the bones
And iron case were gone; but on the turf,
Hard by, soon after that fell deed was wrought,
Some unknown hand had carved the murderer's name.
The monumental letters were inscribed
In times long past; but still, from year to year
By superstition of the neighbourhood,
The grass is cleared away, and to this hour
The characters are fresh and visible:
A casual glance had shown them, and I fled,
Faltering and faint, and ignorant of the road:
Then, reascending the bare common, saw
A naked pool that lay beneath the hills,
The beacon on the summit, and, more near,
A girl, who bore a pitcher on her head,
And seemed with difficult steps to force her way
Against the blowing wind. It was, in truth,
An ordinary sight; but I should need
Colours and words that are unknown to man,
To paint the visionary dreariness
Which, while I looked all round for my lost guide,
Invested moorland waste and naked pool,
The beacon crowning the lone eminence,
The female and her garments vexed and tossed
By the strong wind. When, in the blessèd hours
Of early love, the loved one at my side,
I roamed, in daily presence of this scene,
Upon the naked pool and dreary crags,
And on the melancholy beacon, fell
A spirit of pleasure and youth's golden gleam;
And think ye not with radiance more sublime
For these remembrances, and for the power
They had left behind?

There is nothing like this to be had from any

poet but Wordsworth. Other poets have touched the hidden springs of suggestion casually, while they were intent on the more ordinary purposes of narration or discourse. He alone made of them his instrument. The old distinctions drawn and boundaries marked between Nature and Man, between the World and the Mind, seem to fade into insignificance before a gaze that pierces like his. Vision is his greatest gift, and because, when the interpreter has made an end, it is only from the works of the poet himself that he may hope for vindication, yet another of these great passages shall be quoted—from the Second Book of the *Excursion.* The Solitary, visited in his mountain retreat by the Wanderer and the Poet, tells them the story of the old man whose humble funeral procession they had seen moving along the valley below. He was dependent on charity for his livelihood, asking alms from the cottagers, and rendering them in return some small services by cattle-tending and gathering fuel from the mountain side. He had gone to the moors to get peat when he was overtaken by a storm, and did not return. Search was made, and he was found sheltering himself under the wall of a ruined chapel, faint and unable to move. He was carried down to the cottage, where, three weeks later, he died. The Solitary, who accompanied the search party, tells of the sight they saw

on their homeward journey when the mists broke:—

So was he lifted gently from the ground,
And with their freight homeward the shepherds moved
Through the dull mist, I following—when a step,
A single step, that freed me from the skirts
Of the blind vapour, opened to my view
Glory beyond all glory ever seen
By waking sense or by the dreaming soul!
The appearance, instantaneously disclosed,
Was of a mighty city—boldly say
A wilderness of building, sinking far
And self-withdrawn into a boundless depth,
Far sinking into splendour—without end!
Fabric it seemed of diamond and of gold,
With alabaster domes, and silver spires,
And blazing terrace upon terrace, high
Uplifted; here, serene pavilions bright,
In avenues disposed; there, towers begirt
With battlements that on their restless fronts
Bore stars—illumination of all gems!
By earthly nature had the effect been wrought
Upon the dark materials of the storm
Now pacified; on them, and on the coves
And mountain-steeps and summits, whereunto
The vapours had receded, taking there
Their station under a cerulean sky.
Oh, 'twas an unimaginable sight!
Clouds, mists, streams, watery rocks and emerald turf,
Clouds of all tincture, rocks and sapphire sky,
Confused, commingled, mutually inflamed,
Molten together, and composing thus,
Each lost in each, that marvellous array
Of temple, palace, citadel, and huge

Fantastic pomp of structure without name,
In fleecy folds voluminous, enwrapped.
Right in the midst, where interspace appeared
Of open court, an object like a throne
Under a shining canopy of state
Stood fixed; and fixed resemblances were seen
To implements of ordinary use,
But vast in size, in substance glorified;
Such as by Hebrew Prophets were beheld
In vision—forms uncouth of mightiest power
For admiration and mysterious awe.
This little Vale, a dwelling-place of Man,
Lay low beneath my feet; 'twas visible—
I saw not, but I felt that it was there.
That which I *saw* was the revealed abode
Of Spirits in beatitude: my heart
Swelled in my breast—'I have been dead,' I cried,
'And now I live! Oh! wherefore *do* I live?'
And with that pang I prayed to be no more!—
—But I forget our Charge, as utterly
I then forgot him:—there I stood and gazed:
The apparition faded not away,
And I descended.

The vision having been described, in time and place exactly as it appeared, Wordsworth resumes the interrupted story of the old man. What is the connection between these heavenly splendours and the old man's last day on the mountains? An author studious of effect would have hinted at an application, or directed the feelings to a conclusion. It would have been easy to find in this ethereal revelation a promise of glory and immortality to

man; as easy to use it for purposes of contrast, to show that Nature in her high workings is indifferent to the mortal destiny of man. Wordsworth, never greater than when he is most restrained, seeks no such effect; it is enough for him that these things occurred; the old man was carried down to the cottage to die, while the light of the sun wrought this glorious transformation on the vapours and rocks of the mountains. The effect on the feelings of the reader is thus the work, not of the moralist or commentator, but of Nature herself. The fate of humanity is set in a larger world; the lonely pauper, the little vale that is a dwelling-place of man, are almost forgotten, while these inexplicable wonders shape themselves overhead. "Another race hath been, and other palms are won." So, in an Eastern city, the few humble mourners who are carrying one of its poorest inhabitants to the grave might issue from an obscure and narrow lane to find the highways thronged and resplendent for the progress of a King, and, as they stand and gaze, might feel perhaps that he whom they are burying was no pauper after all, but a citizen of a mighty Empire.

The same grave and high consolation inspires the *Lines* composed by Wordsworth at Grasmere, in the evening after a stormy day, when the death of Fox was hourly expected. The wind and the rain had ceased, yet the whole valley was

roaring like the sea with the noise of the streams in flood, while a star above the mountain-top seemed to listen quietly to the tumult. As he walked the lonely road his depression was lifted, and comfort slid into his heart :—

A Power is passing from the earth
To breathless Nature's dark abyss ;
But when the great and good depart
What is it more than this—

That Man, who is from God sent forth,
Must yet again to God return ?—
Such ebb and flow must ever be,
Then wherefore should we mourn ?

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Poetry and Religion, which Wordsworth often compared, have many points in common. When a great poet appears, the history of the process whereby his work comes to be appreciated and accepted is singularly like the early history of any one of the religions of mankind that sprang from single Founders. The prophet at first is reviled, or despised, or merely neglected. Then he finds disciples, who, though they understand his teaching but imperfectly and see his vision but obscurely, yet in their partial understanding and partial insight are strong enough to move the world. But the original impulse weakens as it spreads; the living passion is petrified in codes and creeds; the revelation becomes a commonplace; and so the religion that began in vision ends in orthodoxy. When once it has reached this stage new dangers beset it, for now its general acceptance attracts men to

profess it for ends of their own, which, whether they be laudable or base, bear little or no resemblance to the aims of the Founder. Much of his startling doctrine is explained away, or pared down, or assimilated to the verdicts of common-sense. The cry of revolt from the old order becomes the watchword of authority under a new order which in all essential respects differs but little from the old.

The history of the appreciation of any great poet exhibits itself, therefore, like the history of religion, in a series of revivals. From time to time, one man here and another there reads the classic page sincerely and simply, neglecting the commentators, and finds in it novelty and power. He puts aside the critical books which, as Wordsworth said,

> Effeminately level down the truth
> To certain general notions, for the sake
> Of being understood at once,

and attempts to enter into closer sympathy of mind and heart with the first author. A new meaning shines for him in the old threadbare texts, and he begins to understand that a poet is not a purveyor to established tastes but a shaping and compelling force, a light thrown on the dark places of changeful human experience.

There are, no doubt, easier ways of reading

than this. By the discrimination of a trained taste the most striking beauties of a volume of poems may be selected, and by the aid of a wide comparative learning they may be illustrated and annotated. But much of this work can be done by one who is half asleep, deaf to the music and impervious to the influence of the poet himself. Something of the freshness of emotion that went to the first making of the poem, something of the excitement, the glee, the passion, must be shared by the intending critic; if he is to understand what the poet meant, he must feel as the poet felt.

In this attempt to follow Wordsworth we have watched him making his way along the precipitous edge which is the boundary of thought. We have seen him, in his effort to grapple with the mystery of the common things of life, trying all new ways—breaking with literary tradition, with social usage, with language itself, lest they should encumber his further progress. He attained to a clearer and truer view of life than is granted to most poets, and he paid the price of this great happiness in a great and incurable solitude of spirit. The seer is always solitary; and, for good or for evil, it remains true that to reach Wordsworth's height of contemplation, to taste the pure sources of the solace that he found, and to be glad with his gladness, a man must cut

himself off from not a few of the pleasures that come to the dusty, kindly traffickers in the valley. There are souls who would refuse vision on these terms; would shut their eyes to truth rather than separate themselves from their fellows by that airy, impassable barrier which a difference of faculty creates. Human sympathy, full and mutual, is what they hold by; they would rather forego faith than let it for an instant seem to cast a shadow upon charity. Perhaps something of this was felt by Wordsworth in his later years; he grew tolerant with the tolerance of age, and relapsed into the modes of thought and speech that he found in the society around him. But it is not the Wordsworth of the early years of Queen Victoria, the Churchman and Tory, whose companionship enlightens and befriends the later reader, it is the strong and daring pioneer of a younger day. He failed, it must be admitted, in many of the things that he attempted; failed more signally and obviously than other great poets who have made a more prudent estimate of human powers and have chosen a task to match their strength. He pressed onward to a point where speech fails and drops into silence, where thought is baffled, and turns back upon its own footsteps. But it is a good discipline to follow that intense and fervid spirit, as far as may be, to the heights that denied him access. There is a certain degra-

dation and pallor which falls on the soul amid "the dreary intercourse of daily life," the heat that is generated by small differences, the poison that is brewed by small suspicions, the burden that is imposed by small cares. To escape from these things into a world of romance is to flee them, and to be defeated by them. Sanity holds hard by the fact, and knows that to turn away from it is to play the recreant. Here was a poet who faced the fact, and against whom the fact did not prevail. To know *him* is to learn courage; to walk with him is to feel the visitings of a larger purer air, and the peace of an unfathomable sky.

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